

# New Potentials for "Independent" Music

Social Networks, Old and New, and the Ongoing  
Struggles to Reshape the Music Industry

by

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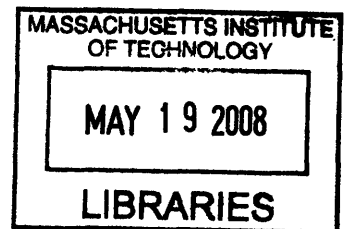
SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES  
AT THE  
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

JUNE 2008

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Submitted to the Department of Comparative Media Studies  
on May 9, 2008 in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in  
Comparative Media Studies

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the evolving nature of independent music practices in the context of offline and online social networks. The pivotal role of social networks in the cultural production of music is first examined by treating an independent record label of the post-punk era as an offline social network. This develops a useful framework for then considering the similar and distinctive ways in which contemporary independent practices are enabled and/or shaped by online social networks. Analysis is based on close, comparative readings of the structures and affordances of two case studies: the UK-based Rough Trade record label (1978 – 1991) and MySpace (2003 – present). Numerous examples of artists and their practices are drawn upon to illustrate how discursive meanings of independence are negotiated within each network. Investigated are potentials for realizing not only autonomy from the mainstream music industry, but also a range of other post-punk ideals tied to a broader independent ethos concerned with issues of access and participation, artistic control and freedom, as well as desires to engender more diverse music cultures. The intersection of offline and online networks in the context of today’s dynamic, transitional music industry further provides new opportunities for more meaningful artist-to-artist, artist-to-fan, and artist-to-company/label interactions. By emphasizing the centrality of social networks, conceptions of autonomous, “do-it-yourself” music making are problematized in favor of “do-it-together” understandings that foreground cooperation.

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## Acknowledgements

Without music life would be a mistake.

– Friedrich Nietzsche

The project that follows developed out of my personal love of music. My appreciation goes out first and foremost to anyone that has been brave enough to create and share music with others, including those known or unknown, amateur or professional, mentioned or unmentioned.

I would also like to thank the members of my thesis committee, William Uricchio and Joshua Green, for their frequent and invaluable contributions, suggestions and reassurances during the research and writing process.

Finally, a great deal of thanks goes to my fiancée, Danielle, for continuously putting up with my incessant thesis related ramblings and my often completely irrational anxieties. The past two years would have been impossible without her.



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## Introduction

Social networks in and around spaces of music making have always existed and they are literally everywhere. But pervasive existence alone does not necessarily translate to significance, begging the seemingly straightforward though richly layered question: Why do these networks matter?

For starters, the creation of music, its performance and/or dissemination, as well as its consumption all entail varying social dimensions. According to American sociologist Howard Becker, music, like any artwork “involves the activity of a number, often a large number of people. Through their cooperation the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be.”<sup>1</sup> These engagements with music occur across an expansive range of social networks, many of which are structured in radically different ways. Some are massive, and arguably dominant, and others are so small they effectively go unnoticed; some favor musicians and fans, while others privilege the interests of corporate shareholders, executives and managers; some are centered on music, or video, whereas others span out more broadly; some are online and others are offline (some both); some foster sonic plenitude, others demand predictability. Social networks active in spaces of music making are important precisely because of these differing structural arrangements and the affordances they each provide. This is particularly true in the music industry. Here the networks of major and independent labels/artists, along with those of artist-led solo and collective projects, intermingle, oppose one another, and even directly compete. Moreover, factors such as creative freedom, royalty and licensing agreements, production advances (for recording costs), marketing strategies, touring support, approaches to distribution and types of collaborative, or fan-related social interactions, are often drastically disparate from network to network.

Even within the past thirty years the range of these social networks has been decidedly kaleidoscopic. Universal Music Group’s global business network, Rough Trade and other early post-punk labels, Jamaican sound systems and dub-plate scenes, MySpace’s massive online network, P2P file-sharing services like Napster, the networked home studios of

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<sup>1</sup> Becker, H.S. *Art Worlds*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1982, 1.

today's electronic DJs, and countless small-scale, artist-led collectives, like the Athens-based Elephant 6 Recording Co., together represent only a small slice of the diverse networks within the music industry.<sup>2</sup> It is vital for musicians, entrepreneurs, designers and researchers alike to understand the structures and affordances of available social networks, old and new, as they map out knowable *discourses*, and, by extension, relational possibilities, discursive practices and sets of power relations amongst network participants.<sup>3</sup> Future directions in independent music making – especially continued efforts to engender more participatory music cultures – depend on a deepening awareness of these networks. Ideally they should serve as *platforms* that facilitate more meaningful artist-to-artist and artist-to-fan interactions, as well as more equitable artist-to-label and artist-to-company relationships.

To be fair though, there are simply too many social networks to realistically conceive of a comprehensive project. As mentioned, these networks are present almost anywhere music is found, from within globalized music/media conglomerates, like today's four major record labels (UMG, EMI, Sony BMG, and Warner Music Group), on down to micro-scale, basement-tape/MP3 "amateurs" who may never share their music beyond a close circle of friends. Even an effort to examine several such networks, in broad terms, with the aim of drawing generalizeable conclusions related to questions like how musicians successfully carve out niches in a saturated marketplace, or how groups come together to engage in collaborative projects, is an endeavor far beyond the scope of the current project. Instead, this thesis is primarily concerned with exploring the multifaceted and evolving nature of independent music practices in the context of both offline and online social networks. By looking at an independent record label of the post-punk era as an offline social network, I develop an understanding of the significant role played by social networks in the cultural production of independent music. This establishes a necessary precedent for subsequently

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<sup>2</sup> The Elephant 6 Recording Co. was originally founded in Denver, Colorado in 1991 (later relocating to Athens, Georgia), by childhood friends Robert Schneider, Bill Doss, Will Cullen Hart, and Jeff Mangum. Emerging out of the collective were a number of influential "indie" bands of the 1990s, most notably The Apples in Stereo (Schneider) and Neutral Milk Hotel (Mangum). See: <http://www.elephant6.com>.

<sup>3</sup> The term *discourse* is used herein to refer to the ways that particular social practices and discursive identities are "enacted within a [specific] social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way in which that social context continues its existence." In this sense major record labels can be thought of as *dominant discourses* insofar as they have long defined many of the conditions, practices, and power relations around production, marketing and distribution within the music industry. See: Mills, S. *Discourse*. London: Routledge, 1997, 10. For similar conceptions of discourse the works of James Gee, Michel Foucault, and Stuart Hall are also useful.



considering the ways in which contemporary independent practices are enabled and/or shaped by *online* social networks. My approach is both comparative and qualitative, grounded in close readings of two central case studies: the UK-based Rough Trade record label (1978 – 1991) and MySpace (2003 – present). These social networks are each analyzed by looking at numerous examples of practitioners who have made use of them as well as in relation to other surrounding networks.

Such a comparison is directed towards addressing a number of important questions. For instance, how have networks available to artists and fans alike affected conceptions and realities of what it means to be an independent musician trying to navigate the music industry? How have the social networks utilized by independent musicians allowed for the alteration of discourses of production, marketing, and distribution in the music industry, as historically defined by major record labels? This addresses the idea that it is possible to reshape dominant discourses through new practices and alternative networks. Also, to what extent are such transformations more profound today, especially in the context of new online social networks like MySpace? Do the affordances and structures of certain networks provide for the attainment of a more idealized independent status, that is to say, is the matter of independence technologically determined? Or does an intentional comparison between offline and online social networks – Rough Trade and MySpace – lead to a nuanced understanding in which socio-cultural practices and new technologies develop through an ongoing, back-and-forth dialogue? In line with this, what can a reconsideration of practices and motivations prevalent in early post-punk music scenes teach today's musicians, entrepreneurs, and network designers as they think forward? Do past efforts to foster community and collaboration, access and participation, as well as self-determination, reveal any interesting insights into the successes and shortcomings of current Web 2.0 social networks like MySpace?<sup>4</sup> And finally, are “new” networks necessarily harbingers of the end of “old” networks?

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<sup>4</sup> Web 2.0 refers not to any changes in the underlying technical architecture of the Internet, but instead a shift in social practices, of how the web is utilized by developers and end-users alike. Web 2.0 takes the Internet to be a *platform* for participation where users can contribute to and modify website content. It is a transition away from one-to-many, static, read-only websites (Web 1.0), to many-to-many, read-write modes of web-based publishing and communication. Representative of this shift are communities and services like blogs, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds, web application programming interfaces (APIs), as well as social networks, like MySpace,

Treating both Rough Trade and MySpace as social networks provides at least partial answers to many of these questions, contributing insights to an array of complex and underexplored problems, foremost being the socio-cultural implications of networks like MySpace for musicians. Also revealed are a number of intriguing similarities and differences between two objects of study that have yet to be compared in any formal sense. My own suspicion regarding the lack of comparative research on such networks is that it stems from a cultural tendency which errs toward correlating superficial disparities with general unrelatedness, particularly when one object is seen as “old” and the other “new.” A recent thought provoking essay by media scholar Jason Mittell comparatively looks at the critically acclaimed HBO series *The Wire*, through the lens of both the novel and the video game, despite pronounced cross-media distinctions. Examining *The Wire* as “visual novel” and/or “spectatorial game” is understood by Mittell as a productive step in “illuminating what makes a particular medium distinctive and how its norms and assumptions might be rethought.”<sup>5</sup> Similar logic applies in asking how the norms and assumptions of the music industry might be rethought, and moreover, reshaped, especially with respect to independent music making. My approach however is not so much cross-media as it is a *cross-platform* comparison between offline and online social networks.

I examine Rough Trade and MySpace as social networks by explicitly looking at the various structures, affordances, and relational possibilities present in each. Both are involved in the same processes, that is, the production, promotion and distribution of music, but they do so in distinct ways under different sets of conditions. Rough Trade is offline and physical. MySpace is online and digital, though intersects with offline spaces. Investigation below the surface level requires looking at the fine-grained details of each network, including contracts and agreements; decision-making processes; (infra)structures; authority, control, and autonomy; the position of creativity; gatekeeping mechanisms; and channels of promotion, distribution and communication.

Creative industries researcher Julian Knowles has, like myself, discovered a virtual absence of

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Last-FM, Imeem, Facebook and many others. See: O'Reilly, T. “Web 2.0 Compact Definition: Trying Again.” *O'Reilly Radar* 10 December 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Mittell, J. “All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling and Procedural Logic.” Forthcoming in *Third Person*. Eds. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardip-Fruin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008.

literature coming from academic circles regarding Web 2.0 social networks and their implications for music.<sup>6</sup> Most surprising is the lack of available research from the disciplines of media, cultural, and popular music studies. While academics remain largely silent on the matter however, musicians, industry insiders, music fans, (popular) music critics, and technology journalists have all been incessantly discussing the numerous socio-cultural, economic, and creative ramifications of these new networks for some time. Moreover, many of these voices are frequently articulating, both implicitly and explicitly, the deep relatedness of old (offline) and new (online) social networks. This thesis attempts to mobilize these diverse voices and their often first-hand perceptions in order to address the importance of these networks for independent musicians and their practices. Ingrid Michaelson, a musician who has attributed much of her initial success to MySpace, readily perceives that different networks come with their own sets of affordances. On several occasions she has publicly expressed her position that she will remain unsigned until she finds a record label that can do something for her that she cannot do on her own, through MySpace – such as having her songs featured in an Old Navy ad campaign, as well as in several episodes of the prime-time TV drama, *Grey's Anatomy*.<sup>7</sup> Other artists like the group Paramore, which in 2007 signed a 360-deal, or “multiple rights” agreement with Atlantic Records and Fueled By Ramen Records, have seen their labels as invaluable assets in helping them increase album and ticket sales and expand their fan-base.<sup>8</sup> Music industry insider, and former Talking Heads frontman David Byrne underscores the crux of the matter: “The totally DIY model is certainly not for everyone – but that’s the point. Now there’s choice.”<sup>9</sup> However, practitioners need to be privy to what exactly those choices entail. In the case of both Rough Trade and MySpace, bounded spaces, or platforms are provided in which a range of actors (musicians, critics, fans, labels, companies, etc.) can potentially communicate, form ties, and enter into a variety of professional and/or personal relationships, but how they do so is often very different and that is exactly what is in need of more thoughtful analysis.

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<sup>6</sup> Knowles, J.D. “A Survey of Web 2.0 Music Trends and Some Implications for Tertiary Music Communities.” *Music in Australian Tertiary Institutions: Issues for the 21st Century*, Griffith University, 2007, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Gottlieb, J. “Come On Over To MySpace.” *Boston Herald* 15 February 2008; Conner, M. “Interviews: Ingrid Michaelson.” *Stereo Subversion* 6 February 2008.

<sup>8</sup> 360 deals are contractual agreements where artists generally share “not just revenue from their album sales but concert, merchandise and other earnings with their label in exchange for more comprehensive career support.” Major labels are increasingly arranging 360 deals as CD sales continue to fall. See: Leeds, J. “The New Deal: Band as Brand.” *New York Times* 11 November 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Byrne, D. “David Byrne’s Survival Strategies for Emerging Artists – and Megastars.” *Wired* 18 December 2007.

Extending beyond surface level comparisons however, it is my ambition to elucidate how the availability and use of these two types of networks have affected the practices of independent music makers and how they have been discursively positioned over time. Furthermore, I ask how meanings of the term “independent” have been transformed, and to what end have dominant discourses – music production, marketing and distribution – been disrupted, overthrown, and even reestablished. The binary comparison between the case studies of Rough Trade and MySpace, though not totalizing, is undertaken purposefully as a heuristic strategy to investigate the nuanced ways in which different social networks open up possibilities for independent practitioners in certain directions while constraining them in others. Additionally, the intentional comparison of “old” and “new” networks begins to delineate a more historicized understanding of how practices and impulses often seen as “new” in the context of networked culture and Web 2.0 technologies – in which we are all now deeply immersed – share much in common with a range of antecedents. Contemporary independent music making practices and their popular conceptions as outside of, and alternative/oppositional to the mainstream music industry are no exception. Post-punk critiques of media power, however limited in their own time, are worth reconsideration today as a way to continue expanding the potentials for independent music making.

The progression of this project is fairly straightforward. Chapter one begins by laying out definitions for online and offline social networks by drawing on scholarship from social network analysis as well as current research on social network sites. This framework is necessary for developing a meaningful comparison between the two case studies. The chapter closes with a brief but important discussion regarding the term independent, its usage, its conceptions during the post-punk period, and its overall resistance to fixed definitions. Though treated partly as a referent to autonomy, independence is also taken to be a discursive practice enacted by different practitioners in different social contexts, and its meanings are therefore highly variable and multi-layered.

From here chapter two turns to a detailed examination of Rough Trade during the late-1970s and 1980s, considering how artists were positioned within the label and the extent to which notions of independence were either actualized or imagined. While this certainly includes looking at possibilities of operating outside of the mainstream music industry, it also

evaluates achievements in relation to a range of other post-punk ideals which were part of broader independent ethos. Treatment of Rough Trade as an offline social network forefronts the cooperative and social nature of independent, “do-it-yourself” practices, underscoring the tensions artists negotiated in attempting to adhere to certain discursive identities while simultaneously seeking an audience for their music.

Shifting to the 21st century, chapter three focuses its attention on MySpace, investigating the structures as well as creative and connective affordances of the popular online social network, particularly in relation to implications for independent music practices. Efforts to articulate an independent ethos in the context of Rough Trade are frequently revisited to explore how today’s artists are positioned within networks like MySpace and whether or not past ideals are in fact pushed further. Although the chapter argues that MySpace allows for a more fully realized autonomy from the mainstream music industry, it concurrently points to the ongoing importance of social connectivity in processes of independent music making, again problematizing conceptions of a DIY approach. Also contemplated is the degree to which MySpace is now representative of the mainstream and perhaps indicative of a reemergence of dominant discourses and conventions from which independence might be sought.

Drawing on the significant role played by both offline and online *social* networks in spaces of independent music making, the conclusion looks at the intersection of “old” and “new” networks in the context of today’s highly dynamic, transitional music industry. I argue that the centrality of the social with respect to independent artists and their discursive practices necessitates a shift away from long-standing “do-it-yourself” mentalities. Instead a more idealized, meaningful form of independence should be understood as part of a cooperative, “do-it-together” approach.



## I. Social Networks and “Independent” Music

If a comparative analysis of Rough Trade and MySpace as social networks is to prove insightful in exploring the ever-changing positions of independent music makers, it is first necessary to mobilize a working definition of the term *social network*. Likewise, there is equal incentive to delineate what an *online social network* like MySpace is, as it certainly bears a number of distinctions from an offline network such as Rough Trade. Because of the inherent specificity, processes tied to the cultural production of music within each social network will be addressed largely in the context of the case studies themselves.

The term social network is relatively easy to define given that much scholarship on the topic has tended toward the adoption of relatively malleable definitions. According to Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust in their seminal work on social network analysis, a “social network consists of a finite set or sets of actors and the relation or relations defined on them,” and it is the “presence of relational information [that] is a critical and defining factor of a social network.”<sup>10,11</sup> This latter point is echoed in Carolyn Haythornthwaite’s more recent research on social networks, insofar as it is the “interaction between people that matters, rather than what individuals think or do on their own.”<sup>12</sup> The centrality of social interactions to the smooth or not so smooth functioning of the music industry is nothing short of axiomatic. Both of the central case studies herein are comprised of finite sets of actors; both have structures which define relational possibilities amongst those actors; and both exhibit a richness of relational information that is essential for explicating how these very different social networks position independent practitioners as well as shape their discursive practices and identities.

When considering any social network – online or off – it is important to constantly be aware that they likely exist within, and/or overlap with other networks, and this interconnectedness

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<sup>10</sup> Wasserman, S. and K. Faust. *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 20.

<sup>11</sup> *Actor* is defined as “discrete individual, corporate, or collective social units,” examples of which include “people in a group, departments within a corporation, ...or nation-states in the world.” Such a sufficiently definition certainly accommodates individuals, groups, and divisions within record labels, independent or otherwise, as well as artist-led projects and online social networks. Ibid., 17.

<sup>12</sup> Haythornthwaite, C. “Social Networks and Internet Connectivity Effects.” *Information, Communication & Society* 8.2 (2005), 127.

can complicate how actors are positioned within them. As networks intersect with one another, actors may be presented with a range of new affordances and connective avenues, but they may also face unexpected limitations. As will be seen with Rough Trade, although there is the overall network of the label, within it there are also its component sets of actors, including the label's staff and its associated artists. Rough Trade's staff and artists cannot be entirely conflated with one another. Artists inevitably had social networks that extended beyond the boundaries of labels they worked with. Though not treated extensively, even fans/consumers of Rough Trade's musical offerings were an important part of the label's social network. Obviously without them the label would not have lasted very long. Moreover, the relationships amongst these different actors were shaped not only by the internal arrangements of the label but also by the external realities of the larger post-punk climate. Other labels, particularly major record labels and their dominant discourses – that is, the terrain of the music industry as defined by their infrastructures, business logics, technologies, and attendant music making practices – played a decisive role in shaping Rough Trade's social network and the practices of its artists.<sup>13</sup>

Fast-forwarding to the networked age, where offline and online networks frequently come together, the situation can quickly become even more convoluted. Musicians who wish to freely share or distribute music via MySpace, or any other online social network, but who are simultaneously under contract to a record label, can find themselves subject to the structures and power relations of two sometimes diametrically opposed networks. While MySpace by default encourages the unmonetized sharing of music (when artists create a profile one of the first things they are directed to do is upload their songs/tracks), there may be licensing, copyright, and royalty agreements exterior to MySpace that restrict such “free”-flowing circulation of content. This was made vividly clear in a December 2007 decision by UMG forcing its artists to remove all full-length audio tracks from their MySpace profiles. Whether downloadable, or streaming, all previously posted music was to be replaced with clips not exceeding ninety-seconds. And since UMG, not MySpace or the artists, held copyrights to the music, recourse had to be sought outside of MySpace. Artist content was similarly pulled by Universal (the umbrella group of UMG) from YouTube.<sup>14</sup> With today's

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<sup>13</sup> See footnote [3], p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Nicole, K. “Universal Says ‘No More Full Length Songs on MySpace.’” *Mashable* 3 December 2007.



plethora of media companies, record labels, music publishers, online social networks, artist-led projects, and associated legalese in and around each, one can literally imagine an infinite number of interconnected network configurations and, as the above example illustrates, contradictions.

Wasserman and Faust go on to define *relation* as the “the collection of ties of a specific kind among members of a group,” and these ties necessarily vary in strength in accordance with how the network in question is structured.<sup>15</sup> More recent research on social networks by danah boyd, as well as Carolyn Haythornthwaite (both offline and online), subscribe to similar understandings of relations and ties.<sup>16</sup> Sociologist Mark Granovetter’s earlier work on strong and weak ties and their relevance to interactions between macro- and micro-networks, suggests, perhaps not surprisingly, that stronger ties between members of different networks results in greater interactions between said networks overall.<sup>17</sup> With a record label like Rough Trade, where production, marketing and distribution discourses comprised significantly overlapping micro-networks – where actors across all three were often one and the same, operating under the same roof – Granovetter’s reasoning seems intuitive. Artists and staff were both centrally involved in operations of the label far beyond the creation of music. Pressing vinyl, designing album artwork and concert posters, folding and gluing 12” and 7” record sleeves, mailing records and press kits, as well as manning the register at the Rough Trade record shop were not uncommon practices for many of the label’s mainstay artists.<sup>18</sup> Factory Records – another prominent UK independent post-punk label – operated under similar “factory”-like conditions, where creative and commercial work was constantly intertwined.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, artists situated within the historically dominant discourses of the major labels frequently maintain minimal control over their creative content beyond the recording and mastering process, and even that is not always guaranteed. Internal networks of staff, producers, marketers, and executives often remain cordoned off from artists.

Exemplifying Granovetter’s logic in reverse is the case of female singer/songwriter Fiona

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<sup>15</sup> Wasserman and Faust, 20.

<sup>16</sup> boyd, d. “Social Network Sites: Public, Private, or What?” and Haythornthwaite, C. “Social Networks and Internet Connectivity Effects.”

<sup>17</sup> Granovetter, M. “The Strength of Weak Ties.” *The American Journal of Sociology* 78.6 (1973), 1360-1361.

<sup>18</sup> Young, R. *Rough Trade*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Robertson, M. *Factory Records: The Complete Graphic Album*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006, 11.

Apple, and specifically the situation surrounding her third full-length album, *Extraordinary Machine*. The album's release was delayed for over two years by her label, Epic (a Sony BMG subsidiary), when executives decided it did not have any obvious or potential singles. The master recordings – produced by Jon Brion, and completed in May 2003 – were subsequently shelved by Epic, which later brought in producers Mike Elizondo (a friend of Brion) and Brian Kehew, to rework and re-record the album for its eventual October 2005 release.<sup>20</sup> This is symptomatic of the weak ties between the highly specialized micro-networks operating within the overall network structure of a traditional major label like Epic. Fiona Apple's position in the label's social network was isolated and disempowered in relation to much of the decision-making of executives around the marketing and release of her music. Her artistic freedom and control in trying to craft an expressive music object ran head-on into the conflicting commodity-oriented business interests of Epic. For major labels, issues related to the recruitment of new talent, product design, manufacturing, not to mention the post-production concerns of promotion and distribution, are addressed by different and often semi-dissociated networks of hierarchized professionals. Marketers handle marketing issues, designers address design concerns, distribution managers arrange agreements with retailers, and executives call the shots on release dates, often interacting together on the basis of separately formed assumptions.<sup>21</sup> Though somewhat reductive, the network subdivisions of the traditional label-system are memorably parodied in a scene from the 1984 mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap*, when the manager of the inane hair-metal group Spinal Tap unveils the design of the record sleeve for the band's latest album, *Smell the Glove*. The sleeve is completely black, entirely void of both text and graphics.<sup>22</sup> Having not been consulted by their label, Polymer Records, beforehand, the band is left completely dumbfounded. It's not only a campy spoof on over-the-top '80s metal, but also a comical criticism of the dissociated, sometimes off-limits social networks that artists must negotiate in the music industry.<sup>23</sup> Many decisions are simply made without any input from the artist. In looking at Rough Trade and other independent record labels however, one finds clear efforts directed at transforming the relational possibilities between artist and label to be

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<sup>20</sup> Valby, K. "The 'Extraordinary' Truth." *Entertainment Weekly* 30 September 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Negus, K. *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. London: Routledge, 1999, 54-55.

<sup>22</sup> *This Is Spinal Tap*. Dir. Rob Reiner. Embassy Pictures, 1984.

<sup>23</sup> While the Polymer label is purely fictitious, it was an intentional parody of the actual UK-based Polydor label, which was at the time a subsidiary imprint of PolyGram, then owned by media giant Philips.

more mutually beneficial.

Although independent labels have been popularly mythologized for at least several decades (certainly since the emergence of punk rock) as being profoundly antithetical in both theory and practice to the mainstream recording industry, as will be seen with Rough Trade in the following chapter, ideals of artistic control, access, participation, and independence were far from fully realized. The development of strong connections, or ties between artists and manufacturers, designers, marketers, distributors, other artists, as well as fans, though successful on certain levels, still faced a number of relational limitations in the context of prevailing network structures rooted in industrial logics and technologies of physicality. These constraining factors, that together have historically comprised the dominant discourses of the mainstream music industry, cordoned off possibilities for truly alternative network structures. In the end, the strength of ties between different networks and their actors are often pre-determined not on the basis of any real-world relationships, but instead by available network structures and the dominant discourses they maintain. Chapter two explores the extent to which Rough Trade, through the practices of its artists, could realize ideals tied to post-punk notions of independence, especially given the context and conditions of music making during the late-1970s and 1980s.

### **Online Social Networks**

While offline social networks are reliant on geographically limited and more time-dependent forms communication, online social networks – and the Internet more generally – allow for more rapid, spatially-independent, peer-to-peer communication between individuals as well as groups and organizations. A previously unimaginable range of connections “can emerge based on interest, common need, or commercial enterprise, such as scholarly networks among academics; social and medical support groups; Usenet discussion groups; online universities, courses, and degree programs; and ... activist groups.”<sup>24</sup> Add to this list countless established and aspiring musicians, music fans, and up-and-coming entrepreneurs that together define a diverse range of music communities.

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<sup>24</sup> Haythornthwaite, 141.

danah boyd and Nicole Ellison provide the following concise definition for online social networks, or what they refer to as social network sites:

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.<sup>25</sup>

These three basic elements are in part what distinguish web-based, or online social networks from those that are offline, insofar as together “they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks.”<sup>26</sup> Some obvious contemporary examples of such networks active in music include MySpace, Last-FM, Imeem, and Facebook, among many others. For artists using MySpace specifically, information is conveyed digitally, often through text (genre, location, members, influences, record label, type of label, a weblog, upcoming live performances), images (live/studio, press, and fan photos, album artwork), video (live, music, and fan videos), links (“Friends”/fans, venues, music retailers, merchandise), and especially music (streaming audio, downloads). Moreover, these textual and audio-visual modes of self-expression operate alongside one another, all within a MySpace profile.

One caveat worth attaching to boyd and Ellison’s definition however is that the creators and/or managers of these (semi-)public profiles need not be individuals. Groups of musicians, record labels, multi-group collaboratives, concert venues/clubs, radio stations, and even music stores – which may each have highly variable numbers of actors – can all create and manage profiles within these sorts of online social networks. Just as with offline networks, this may entail overlapping networks and possible conflicts of interest.

Regardless, the most consequential aspect of an online social network for musicians remains the ability to construct a web-based, publicly accessible, readily updated profile that others in the network can find, connect to (if a registered user), and then display that connection to others. The analogous display of a social network for musicians in the context of pre-Internet, offline networks was in face-to-face interactions, with establishments like the Rough Trade record shop serving as important sites for post-punk music communities to

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<sup>25</sup> boyd, d. and N.B. Ellison. “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13(1), Article 11, 2007, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

come together. Significant for today's independent practitioners is the open, cost-free nature of many popular online social networks. With MySpace, artists, music fans, and users more generally, can all freely register for an account and literally within minutes start uploading their creative content to potentially share with others in the network, again, barring exterior copyright constraints.<sup>27</sup> Traditional gatekeeping apparatuses are diminished, if not entirely dismantled. Though impossible to explicitly link post-punk's "anyone can do it" approach to music making to the accessibility of contemporary Web 2.0 platforms like MySpace, there is an implicit furtherance of past motivations directed toward giving more artists the chance to participate.

Available research suggests that most online social networks primarily support pre-existing social relations, namely, an articulation of the offline in an online space. The findings of Ellison et al. for example have found that Facebook is largely used to maintain existing offline relationships or to solidify new offline connections, as opposed to meeting new people in the network.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, quantitative research by Golder et al. concludes that Facebook use, particularly among college students, supports both geographically proximate and distant connections, but these are again largely based on pre-established, offline relationships.<sup>29</sup> But such research does not adequately consider the relationships, or loose connections that form around processes of music discovery and sharing. New and emerging online social networks, according to Julian Knowles are increasingly connecting "producers to consumers via artist similarity, taste profiling and recommendation data as well as linking listeners with shared tastes and interests."<sup>30</sup> Today users can browse/search millions of musician profiles, listen to embedded playlists, stream personalized Internet radio stations based on social tagging, and subscribe to RSS feeds of MP3 blogs and countless podcasts. And the discovery of new music via these channels does not at all depend on the establishment of either a strong or visible connection within various online spaces. As Yochai Benkler argues in his formative book *The Wealth of Networks*, these sorts of new

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<sup>27</sup> The term *user* refers to those who do not post their own creative musical content. *Artist* and *musician* are employed to refer to those that do.

<sup>28</sup> Ellison, N.B., C. Steinfield, and C. Lampe. "The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12.4, Article 1, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Golder, S. et al. "Rhythms of Social Interaction: Messaging Within a Massive Online Network." HP Labs Research Paper, Palo Alto, California, 2006, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Knowles, 7.

modes of connecting provide for “attractive supplements as we seek new and diverse ways to embed ourselves in relation to others, to gain efficacy in weaker ties ... and a greater degree of freedom from the hierarchical and constraining aspects of some of our social relations.”<sup>31</sup> New online social networks allow loose, fluid relations around new music to form rapidly, unexpectedly, and increasingly outside of the previously dominant discourses of the mainstream music industry. With the democratization of the tools of production and distribution, and the attendant blurring of producer and consumer, Knowles remarks “that peers and prosumers now represent a powerful combined force for tastemaking, artist exposure and the establishment of relationships between content.”<sup>32</sup> For current independent practitioners trying to take full advantage of a perceivably more leveled playing field, they must increasingly exercise a deep understanding of the networks available to them. Chapter three will turn to a detailed exploration of MySpace’s social network in order to explore the ways it positions independent artists and shapes their discursive practices.

### **“Independent” From What?**

Because of its conceptual centrality to the project, the term “independent” – as applied specifically to musicians and record labels, as well as their practices – demands a brief explanation regarding its frequent usage and meaning(s). The Oxford English Dictionary provides a reasonable starting point:

independent, *adj.* 1. a. Not depending upon the authority of another, not in a position of subordination or subjection; not subject to external control or rule; self-governing, autonomous, free.

By the late-1960s and early-1970s the term independent had certainly taken on such meanings in relation to the mainstream music industry, especially as it was being applied to UK punk rock as well as American proto-punk and garage rock.<sup>33</sup> The rebellious atmosphere of ‘60s counterculture was no small factor in a longer-term trajectory of changing power relations for musicians in the industry. Artists like the Beatles, Stevie Wonder, and Bob Dylan had negotiated more favorable contracts with major labels,

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<sup>31</sup> Benkler, Y. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, 377.

<sup>32</sup> Knowles, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Reynolds, S. *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005, 27-28.

exercising unheard of creative control and freedom over their music.<sup>34</sup> By title, even independent record labels were nothing new by the 1970s, spanning diverse genres, including R&B, country, folk and bluegrass. However, though their operations were “outside” of the mainstream, their practices were not noticeably dissimilar to those of their larger, corporate counterparts. Oppositional, Marxist-oriented notions of cultural production and artistic independence had little to do with their self-conceptions.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, the impetus emerging out of punk was one in which an increasing number of musicians were articulating themselves and their practices as both independent from, and in opposition to, what they conceived of as hegemonic, global media conglomerates (e.g. major record labels). With the arrival of post-punk by the mid to late-1970s, when labels like Rough Trade entered the mix, the term independent was being used far and wide to describe a vast range of artists and labels. Its meanings had become firmly linked to rhetorical notions that artists could and did operate outside of dominant industry discourses.<sup>36</sup> Popular use of the term has prevailed up through the present moment. However, meanings were more complicated insofar as the term independent became closely linked to a broader ethos that encapsulated other ideals beyond autonomy alone. These included goals of increasing access and participation in music making, creating conditions that favored more artistic freedom and control, as well as the fostering of stronger music communities.<sup>37</sup> Both implicitly and explicitly, these ideals were part of a push to engender more shared, collaborative, and sonically diverse music cultures. Despite being grounded partially in mythologized, reductive conceptions of the mainstream music industry, the independent ethos that emerged during the post-punk moment proved significant for many small-scale cultural producers. Not only did it encourage, and help establish a range of alternative discursive identities, practices and social relationships, it also provided opportunities for labels and artists to justify and differentiate their operations within the music industry.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Azerrad, M. *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground, 1981-1991*. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2001, 7-9.

<sup>35</sup> Hesmondhalgh, D. “Post-Punk’s Attempt to Democratise the Music Industry: The Success and Failure of Rough Trade.” *Popular Music* 16.3 (1997): 256.

<sup>36</sup> Kruse, H. *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003, 8-10.

<sup>37</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 255-257.

<sup>38</sup> Strachan, D. “Micro-Independent Record Labels in the UK: Discourse, DIY Cultural Production, and the Music Industry.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10.2 (2007): 245-246.

Post-punk's music, aesthetics and lifestyles effectively defy any singular definition, or description. In comparison to punk rock, post-punk proved to be much more experimental in spirit, pioneering an immense variety of sounds and styles. Rough Trade certainly stands as an exemplar of the musical diversity that emerged during the late-1970s and 1980s. As music journalist and critic Simon Reynolds notes, many practitioners saw the post-punk moment as a chance to fulfill "punk's uncompleted musical revolution."<sup>39</sup> By 1978 punk was increasingly being redefined as "an imperative to constant change."<sup>40</sup> The prevalence of transformation during the post-punk era, and the heterogeneous nature of those involved in its many music scenes, disallows a concise definition of post-punk. For the purposes of the current project it will be sufficient to understand that the music, aesthetics and lifestyles of the post-punk period were both experimental and quite diverse.

Since this thesis is centrally concerned with the discursive practices and positions of so-called independent musicians and how they have been affected by the presence and use of various social networks, the term independent is largely used in reference to the set of post-punk ideals outlined above, that is, an independent ethos. Although my interest does lie partly with a desire to explore objectives and practices related to actual, or imagined autonomy from the mainstream music industry, it also seeks to extend further and ask how other ideals linked to independence have or have not been realized in the context of different social networks. My primary motivation for extending consideration of post-punk's independent ethos from Rough Trade to MySpace stems from the ways in which such an ethos might today continue to promote alternative possibilities for music making. As institutions and technologies have changed over time so too have meanings of independence remained in a state of perpetual flux, becoming more richly varied, from artist to artist and label to label. "Independent" resists a precise definition because it is not simply a term, but a discursive practice. For some it might mean being free of a record label altogether, whereas for others it might mean finding a cooperative network of like-minded artists that positively balances issues of artistic freedom with useful promotional channels. I contend that post-punk ideals can continue to expand the scope of such discursive possibilities.

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<sup>39</sup> Reynolds, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



In terms of autonomy from the mainstream music industry, it is variable by degrees. Complete independence from, or complete dependence on it is indeed an unlikely, if not impossible extreme. As popular music scholar David Strachan argues in looking at contemporary practices of what he calls micro-independent labels, “because of the historical dominance of major labels, small-scale cultural production related to popular music is dialectically bound up with the aesthetics and discourses of large-scale cultural organizations.”<sup>41</sup> Some artists and labels go further than others in achieving, or providing for authentic autonomy, or the appearance thereof. And even then, independence from the social networks of traditional record labels may in turn relocate dependencies onto other types of networks, like MySpace. This brings us full circle to the premise that engagements with music occur within social networks. Meaningful independence can never entail the absence of the social.

But it remains important to ask, especially given the transitional state of the music industry today: To what degree can once dominant discourses be further moved away from and/or reshaped, particularly by independent musicians and entrepreneurs? Similarly, what are the risks that dominant discourses might reemerge elsewhere?

Before turning to the case study of Rough Trade it is important to note that there is an intentional effort to resist conflation of “independent” with the vernacular term “indie.” This is done for two main reasons. First, the latter frequently points to a particular genre and aesthetic (both in sound and appearance), and is not necessarily indicative of anything resembling or linked to post-punk’s independent ethos. Second, despite my personal inclination to focus on examples that might be categorized as “indie,” the goal is to discuss the implications of social networks in relation to a multiplicity of music genres. As will be seen, the social networks of Rough Trade and, to a greater extent, MySpace encompass spaces in which a wide-range of musical styles and approaches have flourished.

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<sup>41</sup> Strachan, 257.



## II. Rough Trade: Offline Articulations of Independence

So if I can do it, you can do it too / Why don't you try it, you got nothing to lose.

– Stiff Little Fingers<sup>42</sup>

In 1977 the UK post-punk group The Desperate Bicycles recorded and pressed their second single, “The Medium Was Tedium,” putting it out their own independent label, Refill Records. A number of aspects of the release are immediately striking. First, the backside of the album sleeve explicitly states the total expenses the band incurred in making their previous single, “Smokescreen” – a mere £153 for a first run of 500 copies (approximately £650 or \$1,300 today). The sleeve further provides a list of names of forty-three individuals who had purchased it, implicitly fans (Figure 1). Another intriguing and related facet of the Bicycles’ sophomore effort is the way in which the record and many of its paratexts mutually reinforce a larger message promulgating access and participation, as well as autonomy and amateurism.<sup>43</sup> Fans, listeners, consumers, and/or readers are urged to start their own bands, create their own music, produce it, and share it, with the record sleeve referencing prompting lyrics from “Smokescreen,” such as: “No more time for spectating” and “It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it.” This is strikingly evident on the B-side track, “Don’t Back the Front,” which concludes with the inspirational lyric chant: “Cut it, press it, distribute it / Xerox music’s here at last.” Importantly, as Reynolds points out, such decidedly independent practices were not at all common prior to 1976-1977.<sup>44</sup> Lyrics and record sleeve both suggest that the reasons behind the Bicycles’ own formation had just as much to do with a desire to explore practices and potentials of an independent, or “do-it-yourself” approach to music making, as it did with the music itself. At once humorous and poignant,

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<sup>42</sup> From “Breakout” on Stiff Little Fingers – *Inflammable Material* [Rough Trade; 1979]. This was the first full-length LP officially released on the Rough Trade label, and it also features the song “Rough Trade.”

<sup>43</sup> Paratext here parallels Gerard Genette’s use of the term in describing the other elements that frequently accompany a given “text” (author’s name, title, preface, introduction, etc.). In the case of records, the “text” is essentially the recorded music, whereas the paratext might include: the appearance of the spiral grooves or etchings on the record, any coloration or imagery on the record’s surface, the group’s name, the title of the record, the record sleeve and accompanying text, the label in the center of the record itself, any additional items packaged with the record (stickers or promotional materials), etc. See: Genette, G. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 1-15.

<sup>44</sup> Reynolds, 27.

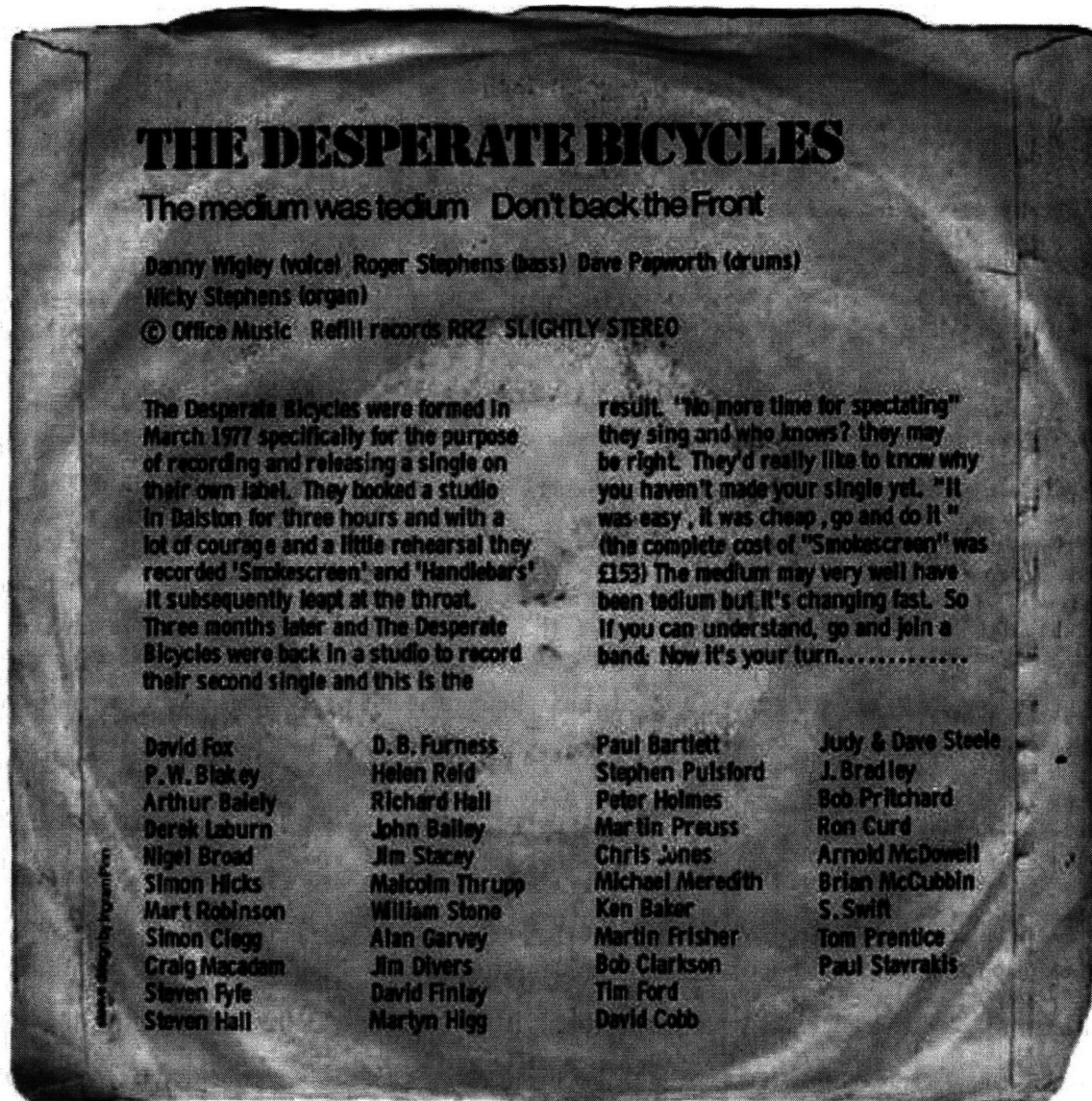


Figure 1: Reverse side of 7" record sleeve for The Desperate Bicycles' 1977 single, "The Medium Was Tedium," and B-side "Don't Back the Front."<sup>45</sup>

the sleeve lauds the group's patently de-professionalized *modus operandi*, with the record having been mastered in "SLIGHTLY STEREO." Alongside numerous other groups similarly engaging with music around this time, the Bicycles' were undertaking a highly directed experiment aimed at mapping out new alternative practices in a music industry long defined by the dominant business logics of major record labels. Although only a "single" artifact, "The Medium Was Tedium" visibly and audibly foregrounded many of the core

<sup>45</sup> [http://www.derekerdman.com/ilovemilkshakes/october2004/Desperate\\_Bicycles\\_Anthology/desperate\\_bicycles.htm](http://www.derekerdman.com/ilovemilkshakes/october2004/Desperate_Bicycles_Anthology/desperate_bicycles.htm) (Retrieved: 7 December 2007).

post-punk ideals and objectives that have been driving forces for countless independent-minded music makers from the late-1970s onward.

Jumping off from the independent ethos that the Bicycles' record succinctly distills, the central concern of this chapter is with trying to more deeply understand how certain social networks available to practicing musicians during the late-1970s and 1980s affected the possibilities for realizing such an ambitious ethos. As discussed in chapter one, meanings of independence, and the potentials for achieving many of its ideals, have remained in flux through the present moment as music practices and social networks continue to co-evolve. Understanding the manifestations of independence that gained traction in post-punk scenes is fundamental to acquiring a sense of what strategies proved successful in achieving stated goals and what approaches remained problematic. Figuring prominently into early conceptions and actualizations of independence were the social networks of numerous, so-called independent record labels, and in particular the well-known UK label, Rough Trade. Even the "one band, one label," DIY operations of groups like The Desperate Bicycles were nevertheless situated within, and in many ways reliant upon social networks like Rough Trade, particularly its distribution arm. As Becker makes clear, the appearance of some sort of complete autonomy in the production of any art – whether poetry, painting, or music – is ultimately based on superficial perceptions.<sup>46</sup> The reality is that the artist "works in the center of a network of cooperating people, all of whose work is essential to the final outcome. Wherever [the artist] depends on others, a cooperative link exists."<sup>47</sup> The Desperate Bicycles depended on fans/consumers (recall the list of names on the sleeve), as well as a variety of promotional (fanzines, radio) and distribution channels (Rough Trade). By focusing on the social, I intentionally undercut the assumption of autonomy present in the DIY mentality, suggesting instead that music making is inherently a "do-it-together" process.

Looking closely at Rough Trade as a social network provides a rich case study for exploring the ways in which its structures and internal logics situated artists within it. Possibilities for alternative practices, discursive identities, and relational possibilities were opened in certain

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<sup>46</sup> Becker, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 25.

directions and limited in others. Specifically, how did the network structures of Rough Trade position practitioners with respect to their desires to achieve and maintain autonomy from the mainstream music industry? And to what extent did opportunities exist to truly break out of the industrial mold and reshape practices, especially given the technological constraints on music production, marketing and distribution during the late-1970s and early-1980s? Finally, aside from issues of autonomy and creative freedom, how were other post-punk ideals, such as the fostering of more diverse and participatory music cultures realized or not by artists within Rough Trade's social network?

### A Brief Overview

Rough Trade began in 1976 as a "specialist" record store opened by independent music entrepreneur Geoff Travis in the Notting Hill district of West London. The specialist classification refers to the penchant of such stores to stock a highly variable selection of underground and subcultural recordings, intentionally catering to a diverse range of niche music audiences. Within a year of opening its doors Travis' record shop was circulating not only copies of The Desperate Bicycles' "The Medium Was Tedium," but also The Buzzcocks' *Spiral Scratch* EP (similarly self-released on the band's own New Hormones label, with the sleeve listing production expenses), along with a rapidly increasing number of lesser-known recordings from the UK and elsewhere all bearing an unmistakable independent mark. According to Rob Young, present day editor-at-large of the international music magazine, *The Wire*, it was evident by 1977 that more and more records moving through the Rough Trade shop were "the product of a total 'do it yourself' mentality – recorded, pressed and manufactured entirely at the group's expense."<sup>48</sup> This proliferation of independent music was part of a larger post-punk trajectory. Unlike punk rock (or proto-punk and American garage rock) before it, post-punk was more specifically concerned with disrupting the long dominant network structures and practices linked to production, marketing, and distribution in the mainstream music industry.<sup>49</sup> At stake were issues of

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<sup>48</sup> Young, 24.

<sup>49</sup> This is not to say that punk, proto-punk, and/or garage rock did not have their own anti-establishment rhetoric, ideologies and sets of practices; it is meant only to point out that many practitioners in the post-punk period focused more energy towards subverting infrastructures and logics of the music industry. Punk bands,

power tied to questions of artistic control and freedom, as well as broader considerations of who exactly could participate.

Rough Trade decided to more fully enter this contentious music and cultural milieu in 1978, officially morphing from a record shop alone into an eponymously named label. As Holly Kruse discusses in her ethnographic study of pre-Internet independent music scenes, *Site and Sound*, the Rough Trade label “strove to maintain a system of internal democracy in opposition to the dominant industry ... by controlling the process from production to retail sale.”<sup>50</sup> The idea was to have a loosely defined, non-hierarchical, shoot-from-the-hip approach to the music industry in which decision-making occurred by committee and collective deliberation amongst the label’s staff and artists. By the early 1980s however, with UK and US retail outlets already in place, as well as a powerful national distribution arm – achieved through close associations with other UK independents and record stores – the Rough Trade network had already taken on many of the vertically integrated characteristics of the majors. The mid-1980s witnessed the label branch out even more ambitiously, opening shops and distribution facilities in France (Paris), Germany, and even Japan (Tokyo). On top of this infrastructural growth, the label also instituted a five-year strategy in 1986 in an effort to increase profitability through the development of more popular acts with the promise of longevity, modeled in part after the label’s earlier success with The Smiths. Finally, in 1991, following numerous financial ups and downs stemming from signing too many artists and stretching its resources too thin, Rough Trade filed for bankruptcy. The label was later relaunched in 2000, but in partnership with the Sanctuary Group, a subsidiary of UMG, one of the six major labels at the time. While the alternative practices of groups like The Desperate Bicycles and The Buzzcocks might be read as entirely self-sustained DIY efforts at first glance, they too were situated and aided by a variety of surrounding post-punk social networks, of which Rough Trade was a significant one.

Within the past decade there have been numerous and extensive surveys of independent labels, artists and music making practices of the post-punk period of the late-1970s and

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like the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and the Ramones, “without exception fell back into the traditional way of doing things,” namely, signing recording and distribution deals with major labels. See: Reynolds, 27-28.

<sup>50</sup> Kruse, 51.

1980s, both from within the academy, and outside of it.<sup>51</sup> The Rough Trade label has been described as a network elsewhere – even by Travis himself – though perhaps with less directed intentionality as applied here.<sup>52</sup> Rough Trade is chosen as one my sites of analysis for two main reasons. First, there is a wealth of prior research on the label – both in the form of scholarship and popular narratives – particularly in comparison with other independent labels of the period. The second deciding factor is implicitly linked to the first, namely the influential status that Rough Trade and many of its artists tend to occupy in the history of late-20th century independent music. By explicitly examining Rough Trade as a social network I can later compare its structures and the practices of its associated artists with networks relevant to independent music today. This is especially relevant in tracing the similarities and differences between offline and online social networks, in order to understand the implications of each in relation to articulations of an independent ethos.

I argue that the social networks of independent labels like Rough Trade broke significant ground in their attempts to merge the historically dialogic, yet generally separate discourses of music production, marketing, and distribution. Artists were provided with a more participatory and collaborative environment wherein they could be more centrally involved in music making processes from start to finish. Rough Trade acted as an important early platform enabling many post-punk practitioners the chance to articulate their independence from the mainstream. The relationships between label staff and artists were structured such that two parties normally understood as distinct were instead viewed as mutual partners in interconnected practices of cultural production. From the start Rough Trade's artists were given unprecedented creative freedom and their contractual agreements were reflective of increased artistic control and equitability. Furthermore, those working with the label were consistently afforded opportunities to contribute their own input and criticisms in addressing a range of issues, from A&R and talent recruitment, to recording and production techniques as well as music release decisions.

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<sup>51</sup> See especially Azerrad, Felder, Hesmondhalgh, Kruse, Reynolds, Rosen, and Young.

<sup>52</sup> Rosen, P. "It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!" Technology and Anarchy in the UK Music Industry." *Twenty-First Century Anarchism: Unorthodox Ideas for a New Millenium*. Eds. Jon Purkis and James Bowen. London: Cassell Press, 1999, 6; Hesmondhalgh, 257.



In the end however, attainment of an authentic form of independence – one that entailed a more profound restructuring of how record labels, and by extension, artists operated – remained out of reach despite a persistence of rhetorical claims to the contrary.

Shortcomings in achieving stated objectives were rooted partly in the physical realities inherent in the offline social networks of record labels, independent or otherwise. However obvious, prior to the introduction of digital audio encoding technologies and the widespread use of networked computers, at least within Western societies, music recordings very much remained tangible objects that could only be produced and circulated in real-space. Such constraints presented aspiring independent labels and artists seeking out even economic sustainability with numerous hurdles. Longevity proved highly improbable absent the vertically integrated infrastructures, broader social networks (and their business connectivities), and capital resources typical of the increasingly multinational major labels. To their benefit, but also in direct conflict with the label's overarching independent ethos, Rough Trade recognized and adapted to these realities. There were also conceptual struggles related to internal and external factors intrinsic to the label system, such as the decision-making processes around what music would be produced, promoted, and distributed. The social network of any record label is ultimately a closed, bounded system, and one in which not everyone can be given a chance to participate. In order to viably navigate music making discourses, Rough Trade could do little more than adopt and reconstitute many of the practices, logics and structures existing in the dominant discourses of the music industry already, albeit on a significantly smaller scale.

### **Working *With* the Label**

From the beginning, founder Geoff Travis played a decisive role in defining the “politics” of Rough Trade. In an interview with popular music historian David Hesmondhalgh in the early '90s, Travis concisely described his conception of how the label sought to position the artists it worked with:

It was a political thing. ‘Why are the Clash so stupid? Why have they signed to CBS?’ When the thing to do is to get your own distribution *network*, then you’ve got control, you’ve got power. You can

decide *with* musicians what gets out to the country and give people alternate means of information (emphasis added).<sup>53</sup>

The label's efforts were directed towards a renegotiation of the mainstream music industry's traditional sets of top-down power relations, which tended to situate artists on the lower rungs of the business ladder. Instead, Rough Trade's musicians would play a much more active role in shaping the label's musical identity, making decisions *with* the label's staff. This was based primarily on recognition that for many independent-minded musicians "controlling their own output was a political end in itself, even if their music wasn't overtly political," and also that having a meaningful voice amongst a community of like-minded peers was crucial in addressing issues of power.<sup>54</sup> Travis likewise articulates the label's motivations to inject more diverse sounds into the larger music landscape. Or as he puts it, to "give people alternate means of information" as distinct from the same old sounds propagated by the major labels. This push for alternatives bears notable similarity to Horkheimer and Adorno's call for resistance in the face of the "assembly-line character of the culture industry, the synthetic, planned method of turning out its products," in which "hit songs" are "cyclically recurrent and rigidly invariable types" such that their details are readily interchangeable.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, internal conceptions of Rough Trade that marked it as oppositional to, or at least distinct from the mainstream might also be read as part of an intentional marketing strategy geared toward differentiation and finding a niche.

By no means restricted to Rough Trade, similar perceptions of an exploitative music industry, and strategies to reshape it, were commonplace amongst independent labels operating throughout the post-punk period. UK labels such as Factory, Mute, and Beggars Banquet, as well as US labels like SST (San Francisco), Parasol (Urbana, Illinois), and Alias (San Francisco), along with many others, were each taking their own polemical stances against perceived corporate hegemony and artistic exploitation.<sup>56</sup> Rough Trade was seeking to foster new approaches to music making, and thereby a redefinition of the "politics" of historically dominant discourses. The traditional music industry was grounded in centrality,

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Hesmondhalgh, 257.

<sup>54</sup> Rosen, 6.

<sup>55</sup> Horkheimer, M. and T.W. Adorno. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*. Eds. M.G. Durham and D. Kellner. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2001, 74, 98.

<sup>56</sup> Strachan, 245.

systems of hierarchy and professionalization, contractual royalty and licensing agreements (lopsidedly favoring shareholders and executives rather than artists), and modes of exclusion and gatekeeping. In contrast, Rough Trade and other independent labels were trying to shift structures and label-to-artist relations in new directions aimed at decentralization (especially of power), self-described amateurism, more equitable contracts, and accessibility. Kruse and Hesmondhalgh also point to the significance of Rough Trade's logics of internal democracy via co-operation and collectivism.<sup>57</sup> The overall goal: To cultivate a more participatory, "artist"-favored, and music-centric culture.

### **Now It's Your Turn...**

Post-punk groups close to Rough Trade from early on – including Metal Urbain (who recorded the label's first official single, "Paris Maquis," in 1978), Augustus Pablo, The Raincoats, and Cabaret Voltaire – were consciously aware of the label's attempts to simultaneously nurture a more rich music culture shared between different artists, and also encourage closeness between the label's staff and its artists.<sup>58</sup> According to Richard Boon, then manager of The Buzzcocks, the early years of the label were characterized by an unusually high-degree of interaction between artists and staff.<sup>59</sup> Sometimes musicians and staff were one and the same, as was the case with The Raincoats' front-woman Ana da Silva who worked in the record shop.<sup>60</sup> Rough Trade was visibly and "consciously forefronting the mutual interdependence of creative and 'commercial work' in the recording industry."<sup>61</sup> Much of the push for stronger community and collaboration emerged from post-punk's Marxist-infused desires to break down the elitist distinctions between the "artist" and the "worker." Geoff Travis, like many others who ascribed to what high-profile UK music journalist Jon Savage called the "access aesthetic," resisted the traditional privileging of the artist as distinct and somehow special from others, seeing Rough Trade instead as "simply a place where people are trying to do their work."<sup>62</sup> The basic, yet radical idea behind the access aesthetic according to punk scholar Paul Rosen was "that making and writing about

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<sup>57</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 259; Kruse, 51-52.

<sup>58</sup> Reynolds, 36-37.

<sup>59</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 262.

<sup>60</sup> Young, 18.

<sup>61</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 262.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

music should be open to anyone.”<sup>63</sup> And this blurring of the line between amateur and professional music makers has continued unabated all the way into today’s networked culture.

The access aesthetic is probably best captured by post-punk practitioners themselves. Mike Watt, bassist of the San Pedro, California band, the Minutemen, boiled it down into a single lyrical line that has since reverberated with countless other independent musicians up through the present: “Our band could be your life!” This seemingly straightforward message embodying the “anyone can do it” mindset comes from the song “History Lesson (Part II),” recorded on the group’s 1983 dual LP, *Double Nickels on the Dime*, released on the Los Angeles independent label, SST.<sup>64</sup> On the album one encounters a recording indicative of the diversity that post-punk claimed to uphold, offering listeners an amalgam of blues, reggae, funk, rock, and even elements of jazz, compellingly blended with fast-tempo punk. Watt described the motivations behind “History Lesson” as demystifying the process of music making, saying: “I wrote that song to try to humanize us. People thought we were spacemen, but we were just [San] Pedro corndogs – our band could be your life! You could be us, this could be you.”<sup>65</sup> Groups like the Minutemen, along with Rough Trade’s Stiff Little Fingers and Scritti Politti were bellwethers of a broader disavowal by many independent practitioners of the increasing spectacle of rock ‘n roll and pop music. Backlash was directed at the grandiloquence of superstardom and stadium-rock, as well as the glossy production and marketing campaigns of the major labels that had become prevalent during late-60s and early-70s, for which groups like Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones, Yes, and Pink Floyd were the archetypes. The access aesthetic flew in the face of such mystifications of the artist and their processes, and instead worked to breakdown the culturally constructed walls separating fans/consumers/listeners from musicians/artists. As Strachan notes: “By actively encouraging the involvement of a larger number of individuals, practitioners are

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<sup>63</sup> Rosen, 4.

<sup>64</sup> SST Records release numerous records by many other well-known independent post-punk groups, including: Saint Vitus, The Descendents, The Stains, Meat Puppets, Hüsker Dü, Negativland, Screaming Trees, as well as Bad Brains, Sonic Youth, and Dinosaur Jr, among many others.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Azerrad, 83.

attempting to demystify the popular music process, and open up access to it.”<sup>66</sup> The hope was to (re)establish possibilities for fluid, cross-community movement.

Although viewing artists as workers – ostensibly to encourage greater participation from previously excluded and overlooked creative sectors – Rough Trade at the same time took steps to treat their musicians much more equitably in contractual terms in comparison to standard industry deals. Contracts that define relationships between artists and label are extremely important aspect of social networks in and around music making. In many ways these agreements determine how artists are valued or devalued, empowered or disempowered. During its first five years Rough Trade almost always opted to work with artists on a record-by-record basis. These one-off arrangements between label and artist usually came in the form of production and distribution, or P&D deals, where the label covered manufacturing and distribution expenses for a given release. Artists would then start receiving equal 50/50 cuts from royalties as soon as the initial costs had been recouped. Occasionally there would be additional, though relatively small advances for promotional purposes. Unprecedented at the time, Rough Trade’s profit sharing deals proved quite attractive for many post-punk artists, especially when held up against the disheartening 10 to 12 percent royalty and licensing agreements that mainstream labels offered to all but the most established acts.<sup>67</sup> In the words of Stephen Mallinder of the Sheffield electronic-noise trio Cabaret Voltaire, “The whole thing with the deal was it was very equitable ... after costs the split was 50/50, which was unheard of then as I’m sure it is now. The Rough Trade ethos was in sync with where we were at, it was the only alternative to a corporate contract.”<sup>68</sup>

While Mallinder’s reasoning might be somewhat reductive – at a minimum there were many other independent labels besides Rough Trade offering unconventional deals favoring artists – his sentiments nevertheless remain intact. While not “unheard” of today, such equitability in label-to-artist relationships does largely remain unsurpassed.<sup>69</sup> As far as realizing

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<sup>66</sup> Strachan, 252.

<sup>67</sup> Young, 30.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Fox, M. “E-commerce Business Models for the Music Industry.” *Popular Music and Society*, 27.2 (2004): 211-212.

independence goes, Rough Trade's P&D deals positioned musicians such that they not only received a bigger piece of the pie, but also retained licensing rights and copyright over the masters from the start. This was a notable departure from traditional norms where music companies would maintain copyright (a significant source of revenue) over the recordings indefinitely. Practitioners within Rough Trade's social network were situated with greater autonomy and creative control over their output as a result. Furthermore, record-by-record deals afforded artists the freedom of choice to work with other labels down the line, as opposed to longer-term, multi-album contracts that frequently led to varying degrees of indebtedness. Efforts were clearly toward the development of a social network centered not just on music, but also on musicians. Structural arrangements providing for economic fairness and sustainability, along with artistic control and freedom were given high priority at Rough Trade.

### **Scratchy-Collapsy Amateurism**

After receiving financial backing from Rough Trade to record their 1978 single "Skank Bloc Bologna," along with two B-sides, North London band Scritti Politti (named in tribute to Antonio Gramsci's political writings) took the goals of demystification and accessibility further. Not dissimilar to The Desperate Bicycles' earlier experiment, the photocopied and handmade record sleeves for "Skank" provided an even more detailed breakdown of their costs, from the recording and mastering process, to the pressing of vinyl and printing of labels; Scritti Politti even listed the names, addresses, and phone numbers of individuals and companies that had provided their services.<sup>70</sup> Also on the sleeve was the address of the group's own shared flat, hypothetically for fan-mail and/or collaboration purposes. Inclusion of contact and expense-related information by Politti and other post-punk musicians was, as stated earlier, intended as a call-to-action for others to try their hands at making music. Beyond the artifact itself, Scritti Politti's front-man and vocalist, Green Gartside, described the band's discordant sound and obvious amateurism as "messthetics," which he associated with other "scratchy-collapsy [*sic*] groups," like fellow Rough Trade act, The Raincoats.<sup>71,72</sup> Polished sounds, technical expertise, and thorough music training were

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<sup>70</sup> Reynolds, 183.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 184.

far from top priorities at independent labels like Rough Trade. As Travis described in an interview on the Thames Television cultural series, *The South Bank Show*, “we measure the success of a Rough Trade record by how happy the bands are with what’s been produced in the recording studio, and how happy everyone at Rough Trade is,” rather than on the basis of external perceptions regarding its probability for success, or how “good” it is in an economic sense.<sup>73</sup> Or, as Becker writes, it is “their mutual appreciation of the conventions they share,” or lack thereof, “and the support they mutually afford one another, [that] convince them that what they’re doing is worth doing.”<sup>74</sup>

Gartside’s messthetics evinces an often overlapping and complementary corollary to the access aesthetic: the low-fidelity, or lo-fi aesthetic. Used to describe endeavors by many post-punk artists to reinvigorate recorded music with some of the more raw, emotive, in-your-face, and imperfect qualities characteristic of “live” performance, lo-fi during the late-1970s was generally understood as an amateur approach to music making. Often associated with “bedroom,” or “basement tape” recordings, lo-fi post-punk music – though lacking any sort of stable definition – tends to exhibit some common traits, including: talking between takes, off-key/off-pitch vocals, unbalanced mixing, yelling, screaming, or simply indecipherable lyrics, noise, feedback, fuzziness/static, distortion, fast-paced tempos, three-chord song structures, or conversely, an unabashed minimalism, and avant-garde experimentalism. Sometimes these amateur expressionist qualities were embraced purposefully and other times they were undertaken for cost reasons. Either way they ran in stark contrast to the mainstream music industry’s more polished, high fidelity sounds, especially within traditional pop and rock genres. As Rosen points out, the spirit of UK post-punk music in the late-1970s was such that artists simply “didn’t need a 16-track studio or a thousand pound synthesizer to make the music of the streets.”<sup>75</sup> In an attempt to demystify processes of music production, Rough Trade and their artists – such as Zounds, who in 1981 released their aptly titled and patently lo-fi single, “Demystification” – rejected the elitist nature of industry-wide systems of professionalization. Eschewed were studio

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<sup>72</sup> The Scritti Politti song “Messthetics” appeared on the group’s follow up release, the *2nd Peel Session* EP [St. Pancras; 1978], which similarly listed addresses and production expenses.

<sup>73</sup> Young, 58.

<sup>74</sup> Becker, 39.

<sup>75</sup> Rosen, 6.

recording techniques and conventions, as well as the high-end instruments and audio engineering equipment.<sup>76</sup> Amateur producers (including Travis himself) and artists at Rough Trade and other independent labels took control of the metaphorical steering wheel and headed straight towards a “lived,” rough-around-the-edges, performative sound. Self-conscious practices like lo-fi, though not actually altering infrastructures of the record label more generally, were nevertheless representative of “symbolic resistance” to dominant discourses and power relations within the music industry.<sup>77</sup>

On the extreme end of the lo-fi spectrum were groups like Beat Happening, based in Olympia, Washington. Although entering into a formal relationship with Rough Trade rather late in the game – releasing their second full-length album, *Jamboree*, on the label in 1988 – the trio’s presence demonstrates the label’s ongoing commitment to the production and distribution of unorthodox, incontrovertibly amateur music. Beat Happening became known in part for their highly unusual practice of recording and even performing their music live using electric and bass guitars without amplifiers as well as makeshift drum kits cobbled together from discarded plastic yogurt containers.<sup>78</sup> Five years prior to *Jamboree*, another American three piece, known as Hüsker Dü, this time from Minneapolis, demonstrated the generative potential when independent record labels like SST uphold and encourage less professionalized approaches to music making. In less than four days time the group recorded and mixed their twenty-five track double LP *Zen Arcade*. Twenty-one of the tracks that made it onto the final version of the album were first takes.<sup>79</sup> During that same year, 1983, the Minutemen’s earlier mentioned forty-five song double album, *Double Nickels on the Dime*, was produced at an astonishingly low cost of only \$1,100.<sup>80</sup> Other groups like Rough Trade’s Cabaret Voltaire, Industrial’s Throbbing Gristle (which Rough Trade distributed), and Factory’s Joy Division, were also moving away from the conventional instrumentation and recording protocols of the mainstream music industry, though in somewhat different directions. These artists each pioneered a range of unique industrial and electronic styles a la analog synthesizers, and the social networks of their respective record labels helped them

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Strachan, 248.

<sup>78</sup> Azerrad, 462-463.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 82.



greatly, both in terms of affording them creative freedom as well as access to promotional and distribution connections crucial for the development of a larger fan-base. The financial resources contributed to foster such creative avenues were equally pivotal. With expertise and technical proficiency seen as unnecessary, and even shunned, Rough Trade provided a platform on which artists could experiment with lo-fi and access oriented practices that began to successfully reshape popular conceptions of who exactly could participate in the music industry. The music emerging out of the social networks of independent labels like Rough Trade (along with hundreds of others), to varying degrees, demonstrated for many fans/listeners/consumers and other potential practitioners – often for the first time – that music makers were by no means “spacemen” (as Mike Watt plainly put it) and their practices were by no means rocket science. More value than ever before was being placed in discursive amateur music identities and practices, resulting in a perceivable confluence of artist and fan (e.g., artist-as-fan, fan-as-artist mentalities). Coupling this with the backing of an increasingly established independent label, and its provisions for reaching a wider audience, artists were positioned to maintain sustained music endeavors while also ascribing to many of tenets of the independent ethos.

### **Signs of Sonic Plenitude**

Together the access and lo-fi aesthetics figured prominently in Rough Trade’s broader goal of increasing the diversity of music available to listeners and fans. On the basis of the sheer variety of styles and genres encompassed by the musicians the label worked with, it is evident that Rough Trade was able to deliver on its promise of pushing music in all sorts of new, compelling directions. Though by no means exhaustive, the following list assuredly hints at the plethora of sounds that emerged out of the label’s social network:

[Rough Trade’s] ... discography reveals an incredible diversity and open-mindedness, especially for an independent label of the time: polemical punk rock (Stiff Little Fingers, Zounds), post-punk amateur experimentalism (Kleenex, Young Marble Giants), industrial noise/avant funk (Cabaret Voltaire, This Heat), electric free jazz (James ‘Blood’ Ulmer, Mofungo), dub reggae (Augustus Pablo, Jah Shaka), African pop and protest song (The Mighty Diamonds, Thomas Mapfumo), US hardcore (The Feelies, Pere Ubu), maverick singers (Robert Wyatt, Johnathan Richman), Mancunian post-punk (The Fall, Blue Orchids), No Wave (DNA), quirky spoken word (Ivor Cutler)... and that diversity increases dramatically over the whole catalogue: a total of 250 singles and 160 albums up until the company went bankrupt in 1991.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Young, 9.

Such diversity became possible in the context of a social network based on strong community and collaboration, wherein a range of voices from different socio-cultural contexts were able to contribute to the discussions and decisions regarding which new musicians the Rough Trade record label should and would work with, and what music the label would distribute. It was not a lone maverick calling all the shots, nor was it the label staff alone. In 1986 for instance, experimental noise-rockers, Sonic Youth attended a label meeting in order to respond to staff objections to the cover of the group's 12-inch single, "Flower," which featured some contentious lyrics penned by Kim Gordon paired with a partially nude image that had been appropriated from a Puerto Rican pin-up calendar. After the group and staff took time to debate the creative choices made, Rough Trade agreed to distribute the single.<sup>82</sup> The Manchester group The Smiths were involved in similar discussions over the release of a number of their singles. In the case of their 1985 track "That Joke Isn't Funny Any More," Travis had suggested making it the B-side, and "Shakespeare's Sister" the single – thinking the former a poor choice for the single/A-side – but Steven Morrissey, frontman of The Smiths disagreed. Despite his personal opinions, Travis held fast to his conception of Rough Trade as a label that located more control in the hands of the artist, saying in retrospect: "No, we would never have released a track that [The Smiths] didn't want as the single – that would never have happened."<sup>83</sup>

In comparison to Web 2.0 social networks of the 21st century – in which social tagging, recommendation algorithms, and publicly displayed, digital articulations of interests and connections provide for a much more obvious transition away from a "wisdom of experts" decision-/taste-making model to one based on the large-scale "wisdom of crowds" – Rough Trade's practices can be read as an early precursor to a longer term trend away from a top-down organization of experts. Instead of the music industry's traditional reliance on elaborate, hierarchized artist and repertoire (A&R) divisions responsible for the recruitment of the newest and "best" talent, Rough Trade understood itself to be more a collectivist entity, comprised of like-minded yet distinct individuals. Drawing on its closely connected social network of staff and artists, Rough Trade more conscientiously used the input of artists in making decisions tied to the business practices of the label.

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<sup>82</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 268.

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Young, 161.

Post-punk's independent ethos was in essence about attempting to undermine the dominant discourses mapped by the mainstream music industry and the major label system, so as to push outward in new, alternative directions. These discourses had ascribed certain meanings and practices to the domains of music production, marketing, and distribution, or what media historian Lisa Gitelman has aptly referred to as protocols, which "include a vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions."<sup>84</sup> Established and adhered to practices led to a neglect of other possibilities for music making (access, lo-fi, amateurism, equitable contracts, and more artist-to-label interaction), which labels like Rough Trade sought to actively redress. There was a growing realization amongst many independent music makers and entrepreneurs that the protocols of the music industry operated within increasingly contentious spaces and were by no means fixed. The meanings, politics and by extension, power relations, remained up for grabs, no matter how institutionally entrenched they might seem.

Although Rough Trade lost its independent status in 1991 following declaration of bankruptcy, it is evident that the label and its artists had accomplished much in relation to the goals and motivations bound up in post-punk ideals of the late-1970s and 1980s. They had established a widespread alternative social network throughout the UK (and even internationally), albeit in physical space, based on collectivism between artists and label staff. Rough Trade's network also acted as a platform providing access to the means of production and distribution for a range of artists that had heretofore been excluded by mainstream protocols. Even in the early years of Rough Trade – with the Internet and an online, networked culture still more than a decade away – the possibilities for a more participatory music culture were already on the horizon. At the same time however, as its reputation grew, the label and its artists were confronted with tensions between autonomy and growing popularity/recognition. Rough Trade's social network was impeded by a series of limitations that would compromise some of its self-articulations as independent from the mainstream music industry.

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<sup>84</sup> Gitelman, Lisa. *Always Already New*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, 7.

## You're Either In, or You're Out

Most of the discussion thus far has been focused on the progressive side of Rough Trade in terms of how effectively it embodied the independent ethos. It is equally important to consider some of the label's shortcomings, and even outright failures, given a number of its purported objectives. This is especially pertinent given the larger frame of trying to understand the beneficial roles that early post-punk ideals and practices of independent music making have played, and might play, in today's networked music cultures, especially in the context of online social networks like MySpace.

In returning to Travis' earlier articulation of Rough Trade's motivations, the most intriguing and problematic aspect of his reasoning lies in its all too obvious irony. Just as he so vehemently derides the top-down business models of major labels, which structured label-to-artist interactions, he simultaneously reinstitutes an alternate hierarchical framework (though perhaps of a less professionalized, more organic order), when he says: "You [i.e., the label] can decide with musicians what gets out to the country." From a business perspective, one could just as easily read this as indicative of Rough Trade's status as a newcomer trying to carve out a niche in the market. Travis even acknowledged the reality of the situation, perhaps unwittingly, in a recent 2006 interview with Rob Young, where he said, "...doing A&R – being the filter for what [Rough Trade] distributed – was my job really."<sup>85</sup> This is an understanding seconded by Shirley O'Laughlin, an early and long-time employee of Rough Trade as well as manager of The Raincoats.<sup>86</sup> No matter how central the idea of access was in post-punk music scenes, it is difficult to overlook the continued presence of gatekeeping mechanisms. That said, such discretion did not lie with Travis alone. As already mentioned, both artists and label staff were participants in a collective decision-making process, wherein they could offer their thoughts and criticisms regarding what music/groups should be produced and/or released. A vivid example was the outright refusal by some staff members at Rough Trade's distribution facility to release Rapeman's 1988 album, *Two Nuns and A Pack Mule*. Regardless of the fact the album was in part the creative effort of Steve Albini – the former frontman of American hardcore group Big Black, and today a well-known

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Young, 156.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 47.

independent music producer – the contentious nature of his new group’s name ultimately undercut any chance of a P&D deal. Not at all offensive by comparison, Scritti Politti’s early mentioned “Skank Bloc Bologna” – though having been partly financed by Rough Trade – went unreleased by the label because a number of staff members criticized it for being too long in duration and therefore “flawed.”<sup>87</sup> While the promotion of more communal and co-operative interactions between the label’s staff and its musicians certainly allowed for more “democratic” input into the process of deciding which (new) musicians the label should produce and release, consensus nevertheless remained situated within the bounded, centralized infrastructures and many of the traditional A&R practices of the label system.<sup>88</sup>

The social networks of record labels, irrespective of proclaimed independent status, remain conflicted spaces, especially when it comes to access and participation. Labels exist as well defined entities with sets of boundaries that necessarily establish barriers to entry for outsiders. Musicians who are contracted to work with a label, although possibly entering into a more open, collectivist network, are all the same becoming part of privileged “artist” class. Certain groups/individuals are “in,” while many others are unavoidably “out.” The decision-making that goes into whether or not to produce, market, and distribute the creative material(s) of a particular musician or group, is a process undertaken by staff and in some cases artists that are already part of the label’s social network. Rough Trade is no exception here. And whether these groups or individuals are referred to as “workers” or “artists” becomes largely irrelevant. Although Rough Trade arguably included more diverse acts than those offered by the majors, the operation remained small-scale, and subject to limited resources, meaning only so many artists could work with the label. The matter then is one of privilege, in which fairly normative power relations based on modes of filtering and exclusion persisted.

As already discussed, power (control, equitability, and participation) was more decentralized amongst artists already working with Rough Trade, but the label nevertheless remained a centralized, bounded network. Decisions were made from within not from without. In that regard Travis’ conception of how major labels, like CBS, interact with their respective artists

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>88</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 268.

appears rather monolithic and oversimplified. Major label artists like The Clash were not as completely disempowered (and therefore “stupid”) as Travis suggests. They too very often play significant roles in the A&R decisions of their respective labels, particularly in choosing which opening acts will accompany them at upcoming concerts/tours. In this way, lesser-known and unknown artists are provided opportunities to perform and share their music with larger audiences. As tours wind down, these smaller acts may well be picked up and signed by the label, particularly if there is a perceived likelihood of success. This is not at all dissimilar to how independent labels and artists go about arranging a series of concerts or lengthier (inter)national tours.

The physical, technological, and by extension economic realities of the music industry during the late-1970s and 1980s created an inability to move away from some of the gatekeeping protocols that structured the social networks of record labels. It was simply too financially risky to produce, promote and release the music of any individual or group that came knocking. Here the overlapping social networks of fanzines and music critics, as well as friends and business contacts, were often critical in easing the transition for an up-and-coming artist looking to work with an independent record label. Knowing someone with a connection at a label, having your music reviewed in a publication, however underground, or sharing music with an already established artist, were typical steps necessary for landing a P&D deal and reaching a wider audience. Recording, pressing, and distributing were all expenses that record labels had to rationally account for, especially independents. The utopian vision that was propagated by the access aesthetic – the idea that “anyone could do it” – remained somewhat of a pipe dream during the post-punk period. Coupled to infrastructural factors were also the ongoing internal conflicts of interest at Rough Trade discussed earlier. Label staff and artists simply didn’t always see eye-to-eye on what up-and-coming artists they should work with. In combination these technological, economic and social factors stifled possibilities to more fully breakdown barriers to entry for aspiring musicians, as the very nature of a record label does much to subvert diversity and inventiveness simply by closing doors.

As will be seen in chapter three, contemporary online social networks like MySpace, Imeem, Last-FM, and many others, do not function with the same gatekeeping mechanisms

characteristic of record labels. These new social networks take the access aesthetic far beyond its earlier instantiations, effectively circumventing old limitations by allowing musicians the opportunity to interact and collaborate within environments where the promise of “anyone can do it” cannot be understated. When these open-by-design networks are accompanied by today’s radically decreased costs for producing and distributing music (effectively approaching zero), many of the problems and risks previously associated with initial accessibility effectively become a non-issue for aspiring independent artists.

### **Building an Industry... Independently?**

In terms of rhetoric, Rough Trade went further than merely disavowing the production practices of the majors. The label’s staff and artists were “rejecting the sophistication of the whole industry ‘package,’” instead developing their own production, marketing and distribution channels with the “support of a *network* of like-minded record shops, airplay from [BBC Radio One DJ] John Peel and coverage in weekly music press and fanzines” (emphasis added).<sup>89</sup> As Holly Kruse notes, Rough Trade’s profoundly ambitious approach led to emergence of a business model that read less like an alternative to the mainstream, as borderline mimicry.<sup>90</sup> Although upholding the amateur experimentalism of post-punk with respect to the artists the label worked with (and how it worked *with* them), business practices were largely conducted with reliance on the same production and distribution technologies and infrastructures used by the majors. Likewise, Rough Trade’s marketing strategies, particularly as the label established itself, leaned heavily on centralized, “broadcast” oriented communication media, such as radio, printed press (whether magazines or fanzines), and even television. Even exhibition and its promotion depended on the label’s own booking agency, PR department, as well as concert announcements circulated via press kits, posters/flyers, and radio plugs.<sup>91</sup>

Prior to the advent of audio encoding algorithms that could translate the contents of a CD into a series of computer readable MP3 files, musicians and labels were situated within an

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<sup>89</sup> Rosen, 6.

<sup>90</sup> Kruse, 51.

<sup>91</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 266.

historical context where the recording and commodification of music necessarily introduced all sorts of overhead costs, particularly volatile for small-scale, low-capital operations. Vinyl records, cassette tapes, and compact discs remained tangible media that had to be manufactured, distributed, and sold in a physical space. From start to finish, the inescapable physicality of recorded music during the late-1970s and 1980s – both in terms of the artifacts themselves and the offline spaces those artifacts circulate within – is one of the fundamental features which defined the social network structures of record labels. Achieving economic viability, or even maintaining a sustainable operation demanded certain infrastructures and capital resources. This is likely why Rough Trade, and other larger scale independent labels like Factory and Mute, were able to remain significant social networks for many independent artists for so long.

During the early years of post-punk there was a prevalence of so-called “one band, one label” endeavors in which musicians would self-release records on their own labels that typically featured no other artists (recall The Desperate Bicycles/Refill Records example). While the number of these DIY micro-labels grew unbelievably fast in the late-1970s, the subsequent fallout was just as rapid. In 1978 *Zigzag* magazine’s *Small Labels Catalogue* listed 231 independent labels, a number which exploded to over 800 by 1980. Though perhaps not terribly surprising, given the many infrastructural, capital, and network limitations already discussed, this number quickly plummeted to a more modest 322 just one year later.<sup>92</sup> Despite fanzine editor Mark Perry’s provocative claim that “anybody doing anything on their own is good, whether the product is good or not,” the reality by ’81 was that a pressing of one-thousand 7” singles had no guarantee of selling out as had been the case in 1980.<sup>93</sup> As aca-fan Paul Rosen personally recollects, by the early-1980s record shops had basically been flooded with “independent records of below average quality.”<sup>94</sup> The independent labels that managed to survive this early boom-bust cycle, like Rough Trade, did so because of their well-established, far-reaching social networks that they depended on to market and distribute music, as well as to attract new talent. Rough Trade had garnered credibility amongst many independent-minded practitioners as being “an organization that supported bands wanting

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<sup>92</sup> Rosen, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*



to maintain ... autonomy outside of the mainstream record industry.”<sup>95</sup> However, the structural arrangements of the label’s social network was “inextricably linked to existing structures of popular music production and distribution,” effectively running in parallel, rather than opposition, to the major labels.<sup>96</sup>

In some sense Rough Trade began one step ahead of many independent labels, simply by virtue of having its own specialist record shop in place before officially becoming a label in 1978. The Rough Trade shop demarcated an important cultural space where practitioners and fans could interact around music. During the late-1970s and 1980s music discovery was very much reliant on word-of-mouth exchanges that occurred in the context of face-to-face interactions and/or centralized, one-to-many media forms, such as print publications, radio and television. Those interested in post-punk music and culture generally turned to the weekly music press, as well as fanzines, along with John Peel’s weekday evening radio show.<sup>97</sup> The Rough Trade shop was likewise an important space for tastemaking. All of this was captured in the lyrics of the Television Personalities’ single “Part Time Punks,” first released on the group’s own label, and later reissued by Rough Trade in 1980. The song went: “Here they come / La la la la laaa la / La la la la laaa la / The part time punks / Then they go to Rough Trade / To buy Siouxsie and The Banshees / They heard John Peel play it / Just the other night.”<sup>98</sup> The shop also received an average of a dozen new fanzines every week, which it would then distribute nationwide to other record shops/labels that it worked closely with.<sup>99</sup> Travis at one point had even considered starting Rough Trade’s own alternative culture magazine, though the idea never came to fruition.<sup>100</sup> The push by Rough Trade to oversee music making from creation to reception, in conjunction with many other UK independent labels, led to the emergence of an alternative media system and what Reynolds has referred to as the “infrastructure for a genuinely alternative culture.”<sup>101</sup> Moreover, the shop had defined itself as the “go-to-centre of the independent universe,” where local fans and musicians frequently congregated. Other record outlets also

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>96</sup> Kruse, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 259.

<sup>98</sup> From Television Personalities – “Part Time Punks” 7-inch single [Rough Trade; 1980]

<sup>99</sup> Reynolds, 38.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 38.

increasingly counted on Rough Trade as the place to go for the latest hyped, but simultaneously underground sounds.<sup>102</sup> For Travis it was about the conscious development of a “network of outlets for things we liked.”<sup>103</sup> The Rough Trade shop provided not only a place to discover and purchase music, it also offered a space that in no small way embodied post-punk’s variegated lifestyles, aesthetics, and musical experimentalism. Here music became an enabler of social connections and recommendations between artists, fans, journalists and tastemakers, which helped to solidify a broader sense of a shared culture and common ethos, albeit in a spatially fixed location.

With a record shop in place, the music produced and released by the label had a guaranteed retail and cultural destination from the very start. Additionally, Rough Trade’s role as a respected distribution channel for independent, subcultural music was immensely important in later positioning the label to be a key player in establishing what became known as The Cartel. Formalized in 1982, The Cartel was made up of seven UK-based distributors, including Rough Trade. Although its members were primarily specialist record shops, they each worked closely together to provide numerous other independent labels and artists with a more effective regional distribution and retail network.<sup>104</sup> Interestingly, large-scale interconnected distribution networks like The Cartel were one of the traditional platforms on which major labels had built up their market dominance. By the early 1980s all of the “majors were vertically integrated companies with their own facilities for production, manufacturing, and distribution of music product.”<sup>105</sup> After several years as a record label, Rough Trade had created its own cottage music industry. While technically autonomous from the majors – insofar as the label could self-sufficiently oversee the music making process from creation to retail sale – the similarities between the infrastructures and operational logics of Rough Trade’s social network and those of the major labels are impossible to ignore. Rough Trade had by and large adopted very similar vertically integrated practices.

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<sup>102</sup> Young, 19-20.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Reynolds, 38.

<sup>104</sup> Laing, Dave. *One Chord Wonders*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1985, 18. Besides Rough Trade, The Cartel’s members included: Fast Forward Communication (Edinburgh), Probe (Liverpool), Red Rhino (York), Backs (Norwich), Nine Mile (Leamington Spa), and Revolver (Bristol).

<sup>105</sup> Kruse, 30.

Even the marketing and promotional strategies of major and independent labels exhibited striking similarities. Rough Trade and their artists had moved far beyond the localized word-of-mouth approaches of smaller labels. Instead promotional routes increasingly included fanzines, other specialist record shops (via The Cartel), and coverage in the mainstream press, radio (esp. John Peel), and even television, which together defined a number of overlapping social networks. The circulation of fanzines within the Rough Trade shops (and elsewhere) were crucial for marketing, insofar as they effectively, at least at a subcultural level, served exactly the same purpose that mainstream music publications like *Rolling Stone* did for the majors. Music magazines and fanzines alike, then and now, tend to cater to particular audiences, and during the late-1970s and 1980s they were typical media through which post-punk fans/consumers learned about new music. The Rough Trade shops carried numerous fanzines like Mark Perry's infamous *Sniffin' Glue* and *Ripped And Torn*, along with Jon Savage's *London's Outrage*, and Adrian Thrills' *White Stuff*, along with more popular music publications like *Sounds*, *NME* and *Melody Maker*. Not surprisingly, keeping their shelves stocked with the latest music press was important for spreading alternative, and particularly Rough Trade sounds out to wider-audiences.<sup>106</sup> As Hesmondhalgh has noted, music making happening outside of London experienced newfound opportunities for more widespread coverage – both nationally and internationally – given the alternative media network that labels like Rough Trade in part helped develop.<sup>107</sup> Unfortunately, since possibilities for exposure were relegated largely to geographically limited spaces, such as specialist record shops, as well as centralized, one-to-many channels of communication, the issue of access remained problematic for many aspiring independent artists. Systems of tastemaking during the post-punk period, including fanzines, still largely filtered artist-to-fan interactions through an intermediary. Although the Rough Trade shop was certainly a site for social interactions between fans and artists, the opportunities for greater frequency of artist-to-fan interactions were inevitably constrained by the shop's own materiality. As will be seen, this runs in sharp contrast to decentralized online social networks like MySpace.

In addition to fanzines, Rough Trade also quickly found "itself competing on different turf, playing the kinds of games familiar to larger companies, as it tried to promote and plug the

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<sup>106</sup> Young, 156.

<sup>107</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 259.

likes of Scritti Politti, The Smiths and The Sundays onto radio, TV and international press.”<sup>108</sup> In fact The Smiths (probably the most well-known group to have worked with Rough Trade) would themselves acquire cult-like status, becoming superstars of a certain subcultural order with the 1983 release of their first two singles, “Hand in Glove” and “This Charming Man.” The latter reached number twenty-five on the British singles chart, and the former, although released first, peaked at number 124 following the success of “This Charming Man.” Even as early as 1979, the Belfast band Stiff Little Fingers released their first full-length LP, *Inflammable Material*, which quickly, and rather surprisingly climbed to number fourteen on the UK’s national pop charts.<sup>109</sup> The striking similarities between many of Rough Trade’s practices and the normative, or dominant practices of the mainstream recording industry are difficult not to notice. And the small-scale reinvention of the major label system in and around Rough Trade indeed did much to undercut possibilities for a more inclusive culture of music making.

Regardless of whether Geoff Travis and others at Rough Trade were overly concerned with the obvious conflicts of interest emerging from the label’s stated goals and many of its actual practices, meanings linked to the independent ethos were undoubtedly problematized. After all, could an artist or label be meaningfully understood as independent while operating within a social network that had in many ways reconstituted the dominant discourses of the mainstream music industry? Did independent labels themselves simply become alternative systems of gatekeeping and tastemaking that one could just as easily imagine practitioners seeking independence from? Rough Trade’s aim to achieve greater financial success lead to growing inconsistencies in the label’s purported commitment to the independent ethos and its attendant drive to transform discourses of production, marketing and distribution to favor (up-and-coming) independent artists and fans. International expansion to United States in 1980 provided an early indicator of these changing tides.<sup>110</sup> And certainly by the time The Smiths were signed in 1983 to the label’s first long-term, five-year contract, it was evident that ideals of access and lo-fi “messthetics” were being increasingly marginalized to accommodate more commercial motives.

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<sup>108</sup> Young, 10.

<sup>109</sup> Reynolds, 39.

<sup>110</sup> Kruse, 53-54.

## Flipping the Switch: From Off to On

Rough Trade did not reinvent the wheel with respect to music making. This was in part because of physical limitations in how music was produced, marketed and distributed during the decidedly offline period of the late-1970s and 1980s. Also, the financial resources of Rough Trade, like any label, were inherently limited, forcing the adoption of certain gate-keeping practices that necessarily undermined commitments to access and participation. Rough Trade in many ways reconstituted the vertically integrated, “inside”/“outside” structures and economic logics of the major labels. Even though the label technically operated autonomously from the majors – in the sense that its broader social network was able to fully oversee the music making process from creation to retail sale – directions toward long-term sustainability, and even economic success, lead Rough Trade to adapt to a terrain already well trodden by the major labels. For artists that adhered to post-punk ideals, and for notions of independence more generally, this mirroring of the mainstream introduced obvious sites of tension in how they were positioned. After all, how meaningful, or realized was artistic independence in a context that in many ways resembled the very structures from which independence was sought? At the same time though – even if one takes the independence of artists that worked with Rough Trade to be largely imagined – the idea of being independent, and the discursive identities it allowed artists to form and express, remained a powerful affordance of the label’s social network. And with the scarce availability of alternatives during the late-1970s and 1980s, such as the “one band, one label” models, artists in many ways had little viable recourse. It remained quite clear that DIY modes of music making required broader social networks (labels, fanzines, radio, fans) and a cooperative togetherness to be effective or sustainable.

Within familiar network structures however, Rough Trade did take the metaphorical wheel in a variety of alternative directions. For starters, Rough Trade managed to position its artists with unprecedented amounts of creative control, freedom, and equitability. And many of the artists and sounds associated with Rough Trade typified a blurring of amateur and professional identities in music making, acting as broader advancement of the “anyone can do it” access aesthetic. Additionally, despite the fact that it was still an effectively centralized, bounded entity, the label consciously initiated an internal decentralization of

power amongst staff and artists that ran in stark opposition to the professionalized hierarchies prevalent within the mainstream industry at the time. Rough Trade instead operated under a loosely structured collectivist model wherein staff and artists together contributed their input to decision-making surrounding up-coming releases and A&R concerns. Strong relational ties between label staff and artists, that valued direct input from musicians, were fundamental to the ethos of the network as they allowed artists to express themselves creatively. These sorts of progressive changes established Rough Trade in the eyes of many practitioners, entrepreneurs, music critics and fans as a bastion of the independent ethos, and an organization that catered to musicians who believed in its spirit. Musicians that were able to operate within Rough Trade's social network gained access to all its attendant collaborative, promotional and business-related connections, which would prove invaluable assets for reaching wider audiences and achieving longer-term sustainability or even viability. Working with a label like Rough Trade however involved certain sacrifices, and a negotiation between the desire to be independent on the one hand, and the goal of building a fan-base on the other.

Keeping in mind the multiplicity of ways that independent artists were positioned by Rough Trade – a decidedly offline network – the following chapter explores the ways in which post-punk ideals and notions of independence have transitioned to today's networked culture, specifically in the context of the online social network MySpace.

### III. MySpace: Post-Punk Ideals Revisited

Oh you cut out the middleman / Get free from the middleman.

– Spoon<sup>111</sup>

What is called the music business today ... is not the business of producing music. At some point it became the business of selling CDs in plastic cases, and that business will soon be over. But that's not bad news for music, and it's certainly not bad news for musicians. Indeed, with all the ways to reach an audience, there have never been more opportunities for artists.

– David Byrne<sup>112</sup>

Thirty years after The Desperate Bicycles put out their 7-inch single, “The Medium Was Tedium,” an unsigned Jacksonville, Florida based quintet calling themselves the Black Kids similarly self-released a “record,” their four-song debut, the *Wizard of Abhbs* EP. Two elements of the latter release are markedly different from the Bicycles’ earlier effort. The first, and perhaps obvious one is the EP’s digital format. Thus far, no physical copy of the *Wizard of Abhbs* has been in circulation, or even production, emblematic of the continuing shift away from recorded music’s 20th century physicality.<sup>113</sup> Even the album artwork is purely digital (Figure 2). The ongoing evisceration of such physicality in the music industry (e.g., the prior need to produce vinyl, cassettes, and/or CDs) – brought on by the dual assault of the Internet and the MP3 encoding format – coincides with the increasingly negligible manufacturing and distribution costs associated with more and more music making practices in today’s networked culture. For contemporary independent musicians, and their attempts to realize greater autonomy and creative freedom as well as expand access and participation more broadly – ideals that evolved out of many of post-punk’s earlier objectives and practices – the so-called digital music revolution appears to be a godsend. Aside from equipment, recording and mastering costs, the Black Kids (unlike The Desperate

<sup>111</sup> From “The Underdog” on Spoon – *Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga* [Merge Records; 2007].

<sup>112</sup> Byrne. “David Byrne’s Survival Strategies for Emerging Artists.”

<sup>113</sup> The absence of a physical copy of the *Wizard of Abhbs* remains the case as of April 1, 2008, though as reported in a *Pitchfork* news entry dated February 4, 2008, the Black Kids have in fact signed a record deal with Almost Gold outside of North America. To kick off the new relationship the label plans on releasing a single on both 7” and CD, and via iTunes, for the Black Kids’ song “I’m Not Gonna Teach Your Boyfriend How to Dance With You” on April 7, 2008 in the UK. See: Solarski, M. “Black Kids Sign to Almost Gold Outside North America.” *Pitchfork* 4 February 2008.

Bicycles) spent absolutely nothing to manufacture copies of their four songs, and, aside from several minutes of upload time, next to nothing to distribute them.

The second, arguably more interesting and consequential aspect of the Black Kids' EP – distinguishing it from many previous independent music making practices – is not the digital nature of the “record” itself, but rather the social network the group chose to use in promoting and distributing it: MySpace.

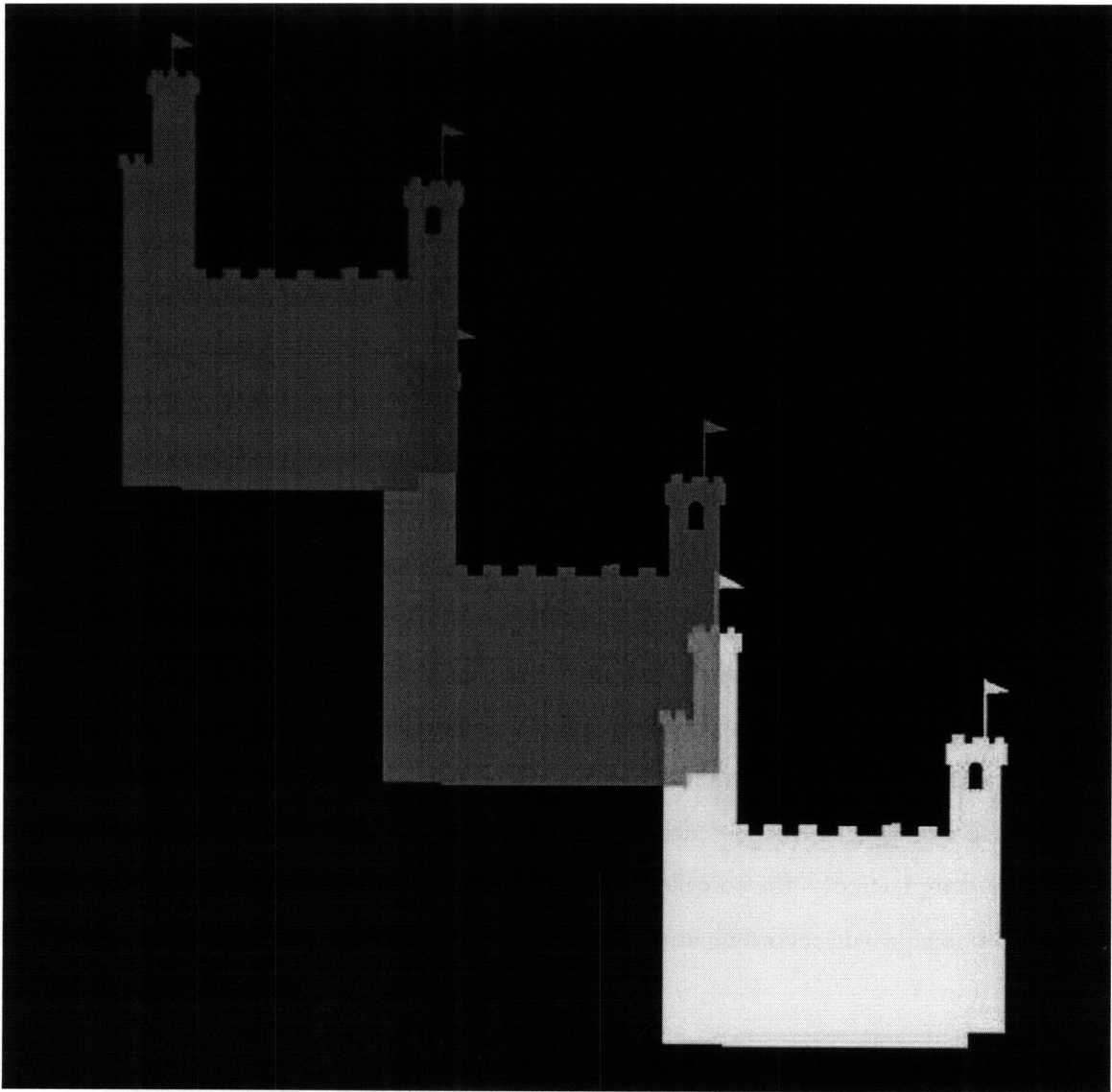


Figure 2: Digital album artwork for The Black Kids – *Wizard of Abbs* EP [Self-Released; 2007]<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> <http://www.myspace.com/blackkidsrock> (Retrieved: 18 January 2008).



In August 2007 the Black Kids started offering visitors of their MySpace Music profile free downloads of their EP's four songs. Visitors simply needed to be logged into a valid, free to setup MySpace account. Eight months after first being posted – aside from some stray copies floating about torrent sites like The Pirate Bay and ISOHUNT – the *Wizard of Abbs* remained unavailable at brick-and-mortar record stores (including the newly revamped Rough Trade shop<sup>115</sup>), MP3 outlets like Amazon, or, what is now the largest music retailer in the United States, Apple's iTunes.<sup>116</sup> Instead, the Black Kids' catchy, genre-bending songs have circulated largely within MySpace's popular online social network amongst a highly diverse range of actors, including other musicians/artists, A&R scouts (usually working for record labels or other media companies), music critics, potential fans, consumers, scavengers of "new" music, and general users.<sup>117</sup>

In comparison to the offline social networks available to musicians during the post-punk period – in particular the example of Rough Trade developed in the previous chapter – a close analysis of the different structures and affordances of MySpace illuminates a number of key distinctions in how independent-minded practitioners are positioned. Unlike the offline networks of record labels, online networks like MySpace, along with many others such as Facebook and Last-FM, signal more profound transformations with respect to how music is, and might be, independently produced, marketed and distributed. Online networks are generally less centralized, less dependent on pre-existing social relationships, more user-centric, more accessible, and more diverse, especially with respect to music. And with MySpace's global presence within all sorts of music scenes – from pop and rock to more subcultural niches like black metal, trip-hop, and grindcore – and its widespread use amongst millions of unsigned, independent artists, it is important to ask what independence means in such a context. The Black Kids, and other musicians/groups discussed in the following chapter are not the first to use MySpace to promote and distribute their music, and they will

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<sup>115</sup> Prior to UK record group Sanctuary being taken over by the Universal Music Group in July 2007, it sold off its 49% share in Rough Trade to the independent record label Beggars Banquet. See: Jordan, D. "Sanctuary Sells Stake in Rough Trade." *Times Online* 25 July 2007.

<sup>116</sup> Apple claimed that the first week of April 2008 witnessed iTunes move ahead of Wal-Mart as the number one source of music sales in the United States. See: Stone, B. "Amazon Accelerates Its Move To Digital." *New York Times* 7 April 2008.

<sup>117</sup> The Black Kids have since ceased offering downloads directly through MySpace, instead offering higher quality downloads (encoded at 320kbps) via the group's new homepage, <http://blackkidsmusic.com>, which is not surprisingly linked to on their MySpace page.

certainly not be the last. This is especially true given that the approximately 240,000 artists using the site three years ago has exploded to over 5 million today (and perhaps upwards of 10 million).<sup>118,119</sup> At stake now, just as thirty years ago during the post-punk moment, are issues tied to possibilities of realizing an independent ethos. Practices and engagements with music to expand artistic control and autonomy, increase access and participation, as well as strengthen community and open up new collaborative possibilities, are occurring on an almost daily basis. Though assuredly not the terminus of independent music's evolution – as the music industry of the 21st century is full of dynamic and contested spaces – emerging practices within MySpace have numerous implications for today's artists. Its connective and collaborative potentials, and its built-in openness, offer a range of sustainable opportunities for artists to operate more fully outside of historically dominant music industry logics and practices.

This chapter intentionally focuses on the ways in which a number of perhaps less well-known (and even unknown) independent artists have used MySpace. Such a choice is motivated by the participatory “anyone can do it” mindset stemming from early moments. But even the actions of internationally popular artists long associated with major labels such as Radiohead and Nine Inch Nails (NIN) – each which maintain highly trafficked MySpace profiles – are likewise hinting at the profound ramifications of today's networked culture on approaches to music making and what it might mean to be an independent musician. In October 2007 both groups purportedly severed ties to their respective record labels (Capitol and Interscope), undertaking their own artist-led, experimental strategies to market and distribute music, as well as connect with fans more directly. In spite of his proclivity for being a rather dystopian personality, even Trent Reznor of NIN expressed his excitement about today's prospects for independent music, stating in a blog post that same month:

[As] of right now Nine Inch Nails is a totally free agent, free of any recording contract with any label. I have been under recording contracts for 18 years and have watched the business radically mutate from one thing to something inherently very different and it gives me great pleasure to be able to

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<sup>118</sup> Cohn, D. “Bands Embrace Social Networking.” *Wired* 18 May 2005; Ostrow, A. “MySpace Officially Announces Music Venture with Three of the Major Labels.” *Mashable* 3 April 2008.

<sup>119</sup> A search of the MySpace Music network with entirely open-ended criteria (i.e., all genres, no keywords, and all countries) reveals 1,024,537 “Search Results” pages, with each listing 10 profiles/page for a total of 10,245,370 music profiles (as of 25 February 2008). This is a highly dynamic number, typically increasing on a daily basis, and it should be noted that news articles, blog posts, and scholarship are frequently riddled with varying approximations.

finally have a direct relationship with the audience as I see fit and appropriate. ... Exciting times, indeed.<sup>120</sup>

The hierarchical, “work-for-hire” power relations long prevalent in the music industry are fading fast, as a growing awareness of the sustainability (and possible viability) of new sets of independent practices occurring outside the traditional networks of record labels continues to gain traction, both from the bottom-up (Black Kids), as well as from the top-down (Radiohead, NIN).

The current chapter uses the example of the Black Kids as an entry point into the case study of MySpace to explore the role the social network has played in shaping the discursive practices and identities of independent musicians, to varying degrees outside of dominant discourses. Also considered are the ways in which post-punk ideals are, or are not actualized, as well as how MySpace has been used by artists to gain a wider audience and, though to a lesser extent, even achieve varying degrees of commercial success.

### Contextualizing MySpace

Prior to widespread access to and use of the Internet in Western societies beginning in the mid-1990s, the social networks available to musicians and fans, along with producers, marketers, distributors, were primarily offline and grounded in physical interactions. As the Rough Trade case study illustrates, these networks tended to operate in accordance with industrial logics and infrastructures largely defined by technological constraints and the conventions of the mainstream music industry, despite rhetorical claims of independence from that industry. Irrespective of post-punk’s motivations to escape the industry – and the somewhat imagined autonomy that resulted – former Talking Heads frontman David Byrne, in a piece for *Wired* speculating on the future of the music industry, notes that record labels had long performed a variety of functions for musicians, including, though not limited to: funding recording sessions, manufacturing, marketing and distributing products (vinyl, tapes, CDs, etc.), providing loans/advances for music-related expenses (touring, new equipment,

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<sup>120</sup> Originally posted on <http://www.nin.com/> by Trent Reznor on 8 October 2007. It was quickly reposted on *The Nine Inch Nails Hotline*, a popular NIN fan-site, as the archiving for Reznor’s blog is essentially nonexistent. See: <http://www.theninhotline.net/news/archives/backissue.php?y=07&m=10#1191866603>

videos, hair, clothes, etc.), offering management and career advice, and handling accounts.<sup>121</sup> Rough Trade certainly aided artists in many of these ways, as well as by fostering a strong communal and collaborative working environment.

With the arrival of the Internet and its decentralized connective affordances, the necessity of a number of these functions could start being called into question. Paired with low-cost digital production and distribution technologies, the world-wide-web offered possibilities for the further destabilization of distinctions between amateur and professional musicians. In theory, with minimal server space required for storing files, anyone could circulate and share their music on a seemingly global scale. But how would fans, consumers, and other practitioners find out about this music? And how would independent artists promote their music in such a space without traditional aid from the social networks of independent labels? Here the ability to tap the interconnected social networks and financial resources of established record labels remained invaluable for aspiring artists.

As record labels and musicians alike began to establish virtual presences online – typically through the creation of stand-alone homepages – processes of social networking in the music industry were still largely dependent on preexisting connectivities tied to offline relationships. Musicians looking for wider recognition, generally speaking, needed to know someone who knew someone, and ideally someone who had a relationship with a record label.

Moving into the late-1990s, even the increased prevalence of online music file-sharing – enabled by the ability to “rip” or encode songs from CDs into store-able MP3 audio files which could be easily transferred online – did not drastically displace traditional options for independents, at least not in any revolutionary sort of way. Exchanging music through early FTP protocols, subsequent bare-bones platforms like Usenet, or simply via public websites remained problematic for many artists, known and unknown. Once uploaded these practitioners ultimately had minimal influence over how their music would move about online. As Internet music researcher Louis Collard notes regarding early file exchange platforms, “locating files and subsequently downloading them was a non-trivial task and this

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<sup>121</sup> Byrne. “David Byrne’s Survival Strategies for Emerging Artists.”

sharing remained a niche activity.”<sup>122</sup> And for anyone trying to make a living, or sustain a music making operation, there was no immediate way to monetize any of these exchanges. Peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing networks such as Napster provided a nascent solution to some of the weaker social aspects of its predecessors. Users could connect with one another in Napster’s network via chat rooms and “buddy lists,” engaging in processes of direct, one-to-one recommendation. According to Shawn Fanning, Napster’s founder, these social features were precisely what “made” Napster work.<sup>123</sup> Early P2P platforms such as Napster, and later spin-offs like Kazaa, WinMX, and Gnutella, laid foundations for the ongoing changes in how music is discovered and shared. Public Enemy front-man Chuck D went so far as to describe Napster as a “truly democratic medium,” one in which “popular music is traded alongside music by emerging artists and artists who have struggled outside the mainstream,” namely, independents.<sup>124</sup>

In contrast to current online social networks however, even Napster’s model is relatively limited in terms of its affordances, specifically those geared directly towards musicians and their discursive practices. While Napster was wonderful for certain social processes, particularly those around music discovery, today’s Web 2.0 networks like MySpace, Imeem, Facebook, Last-FM, and many others, provide for more rich forms of digital self-expression, visible articulations of broader social networks based on a range of interests, and potentials for collaborative relationships. Napster’s users primarily interacted around lists of publicly shared MP3s in a centralized P2P network, whereas within MySpace musicians and general users can create visual, frequently updated, interactive multi-media profile pages. As will be seen in detail, musicians can use their MySpace profiles to share, promote and even sell their music (recorded and live), as well as to connect with fans and niche audiences more directly. Also important is the fact that musician/artist profiles exist seamlessly alongside those of other users, whether those users are musicians or not. The result is an egalitarian hierarchy that extends early efforts by independent record labels like Rough Trade to blur distinctions between amateur and professional, artists and fan, producer and consumer, even further.

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<sup>122</sup> Collard, L. “The Internet Music Revolution.” *7th Annual Multimedia Conference*, University of Southampton, 2006, 1-2.

<sup>123</sup> Spitz, D. and S.D. Hunter. “Contested Codes: The Social Construction of Napster.” *The Information Society*, 21 (2005): 177.

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

Online social networks – of which MySpace is but one example – and the millions of artists worldwide that now use them, are representative of exciting new potentials for independence and post-punk ideals articulated decades earlier.

Contemporary music artist Mark Vidler (a.k.a. Go Home Productions) – a producer, remixer, and mash-up DJ based in Watford, UK – has boldly proclaimed: “You don’t need a distributor because your distribution is the Internet. You don’t need a record label because it’s your bedroom, and you don’t need a recording studio because that’s your computer. You can do it *all* yourself” (emphasis added).<sup>125</sup> While Vidler’s DIY dispositions echo many desires of early independents in post-punk scenes, there is evidence to suggest that many of those past motivations have been taken much further (and perhaps even realized) in the context of today’s networked culture. The industrial terrain of the music industry that Rough Trade and its artists had to negotiate was decidedly different from that of the current moment. Tools of production and channels of distribution were not yet readily and inexpensively available to artists. Today however, online social networks have significantly changed the rules of game. MySpace in particular offers musicians a platform that includes, as Vidler claims, the basic frameworks and tools hypothetically needed to manage *all* aspects of the music making process. If the Black Kids could seemingly cut out the middleman, why not you?

### **Just Sign Here... (Reading the Fine Print)**

When artists work with record labels one factor which almost invariably positions them are contractual agreements. In contrast to major label contracts, Rough Trade offered artists more equitable 50/50, record-by-record P&D deals. With MySpace and similar social networks however, there is no recording contract at all, but rather a series of Terms & Conditions that users agree to, whether knowingly or not, in using the network. Perhaps more progressive than one might expect from a Murdoch-owned business venture, MySpace’s T&C locate virtually all creative control, as well as copyright and licensing rights

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<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Tapscott, Don and Anthony D. Williams. *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2006, 138-139.

in the hands of the artists that upload *original* content to the network.<sup>126</sup> According to the terms: “MySpace does not claim any ownership rights in the text, files, images, photos, video, sounds, musical works, works of authorship, applications, or any other materials (collectively, “Content”) that you post on or through the MySpace Services.” Moreover, the agreement is “non-exclusive,” meaning that artists are perfectly free to post the same exact content elsewhere and in other forms. Important also is that the “limited license does not grant MySpace the right to sell or otherwise distribute your Content outside of the MySpace Services.”<sup>127</sup> Artists are enabled to share and even sell their creative content within MySpace as they see fit, and are positioned in ways that implicitly recognize that the overall (economic) value of the network comes not from the platform itself, but from the users and what they do with it. The creative content of users, especially music, is the cornerstone of social networks like MySpace, Bebo, Imeem, and Last-FM. Locating control/ownership over content with cultural producers, rather than the platform’s developers, values the creative efforts of those producers, thereby encouraging more creation, participation and sharing. In looking at Rough Trade earlier, an analogous mode of thinking was visible in the shift toward more equitable contracts for artists. Like MySpace, an independent record label is really only as good as the artists it works with.

But MySpace’s T&C did not always position musicians so favorably, which is exactly why practitioners need to be aware of how available networks are structured. Similar reasoning applies to relationships between artists and record labels; artists, if given different contractual options must carefully consider the resultant power relations that stem from those contracts. In either case, this involves reading the so-called fine print, which is what prompted long-time UK singer/songwriter Billy Bragg to actually take the time to peruse MySpace’s T&C. What he came across were several proprietary clauses which he interpreted as rather suspect, specifically those that appeared to grant MySpace a “royalty-free worldwide license” over content that had been uploaded by musicians and other cultural producers using the network. For a left-wing firebrand like Bragg, it didn’t help matters that in July 2005 media conglomerate News Corp. acquired the formerly independent company that owned MySpace

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<sup>126</sup> As copyright remains an ongoing legal battleground for mash-up, hip-hop, remix artists, and artists that sample the work of others more generally, the position of these artists in relation to MySpace’s T&C is somewhat vague and potentially problematic, as “original” is a term of ongoing legal debate.

<sup>127</sup> See: <http://www.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=misc.terms> (Retrieved: 28 February 2008.)

for an estimated \$580 million. Bragg decided to remove his own music from MySpace in May 2006, and subsequently launched a protest campaign aimed at altering the site's ill-defined T&C such that artists would be provided with fundamental ownership rights over all of their creative content.<sup>128</sup> And in a recent March 2008 editorial for the *New York Times*, Bragg spelled out in plain language the importance of looking carefully at such end-user agreements, saying:

We need to do this not for the established artists who already have lawyers, managers and careers, but for the fledgling songwriters and musicians posting original material onto the Web tonight. The first legal agreement that they enter into as artists will occur when they click to accept the terms and conditions of the site that will host their music. Worryingly, no one is looking out for them.<sup>129</sup>

The fact that Bragg's campaign proved successful – with MySpace rewriting their T&C within less than a month “to state clearly that all rights to material appearing on the site remain with the originator”<sup>130</sup> – indicates that the ways musicians are positioned by social networks like MySpace should never be taken for granted. Following the T&C rewrite, Bragg quickly reestablished his MySpace presence, but is still trying to push the envelope further in favor of independent artists. He is currently exploring how artists might (and in his opinion should) receive royalties in recognition of their contributions to social network businesses like MySpace, Bebo, and others. These are contested spaces with still uncertain and unstable conditions as conscientious musicians like Bragg continue to demonstrate. If artists are situated unfairly, or are being exploited, those conditions are subject to change and are worth fighting for, just as many post-punk practitioners had recognized.

### **Encode it, upload it, share it / MySpace Music's here at last!**

Beyond the terms and conditions, an array of built-in functionalities accompanies any MySpace Music profile. It is worth pointing out that for musicians there are features included in their profiles that distinguish them from the MySpace profiles of general users. The main differences are that Music profiles have a music player, a concert report, and instead of listings of “Interests” (General, Music, Movies, Television, Books, Heroes), “Details,” “Schools” and “Companies,” there is a “General Info” section. This section

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<sup>128</sup> Levine, R. “Billy Bragg's MySpace Protest Movement.” *New York Times* 31 July 2006.

<sup>129</sup> Bragg, B. “The Royalty Scam.” *New York Times* 22 March 2008.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.



contains information such as Member Since, Website (generally a url for the artist's homepage), Band Members, Influences, Sounds Like, Record Label, and Type of Label. There is also a "MySpace Music" navigation bar toward the top of an artist's profile. Aside from these differences, the profiles of artists and general users are essentially the same. Since my focus is largely on artist use of the social network, I will refer to MySpace Music profiles as MySpace profiles, or simply profiles. By default the majority of features are intended to be fairly straightforward and intuitive to use, with clear step-by-step instructions provided to accommodate even the least Internet-savvy users. As this chapter looks at a number of these features in detail – contextualizing them with examples of artist usage – it is important to keep in mind that these features are precisely what define the structures of MySpace's social network. They enable and encourage certain types of interactions and limit and/or prevent others. Conceptually this is not dissimilar from the affordances and limitations that record labels like Rough Trade place on artists, but the specifics of how network actors are positioned in these two spaces are unmistakably distinct in a number of ways. Deeply understanding MySpace's network architecture and how it facilitates the marketing and distribution (sharing/selling) of music, as well as the formation of communities and collaborations, is of the utmost importance for investigating evolving notions of independence in music making in these online spaces. It is equally important for practitioners themselves to be mindful of network structures as they necessarily affect articulations of independence, as well as discursive identities and practices.

One of the most important features of a MySpace profile for artists is the music player, as this is where visitors typically encounter an artist's music in the network. Full-length versions, or clips of up to six songs/tracks can be uploaded to an artist's profile, whereby visitors can browse, select, and listen to the posted tracks (Figure 3). By managing some basic account preferences, musicians using MySpace can choose to make their tracks available as streaming audio, downloadable MP3s (as the Black Kids initially did), and/or embeddable audio files. The music player also keeps track of "Total Plays," or simply the total number of tracks played (i.e., streamed) since the artist has been active on MySpace. This number is used as the default ranking criteria when users search for particular artists in the network. For users this can be helpful, as there are often numerous artists with exact or



Figure 3: MySpace's music player (Artist: Clap Your Hands Say Yeah)<sup>131</sup>

very similar names. Other ranking criteria includes the artist's number of "Friends" (the number of other users in the network they are connected to) and how "New" the group is (based on when they became active in MySpace), along with a generic alphabetical sort function. The music player also monitors "Downloads Today," total "Plays Today," as well as total "Plays" for each individual track, though this data has no effect on searches.

Embeddable tracks are particularly interesting, as the other two options are fairly self-explanatory. If an artist has chosen to make their tracks embeddable, it means that other MySpace users then have the ability to place streaming aliases of such tracks into their own personal MySpace page, though only one at any given time. Visitors to profiles with these aliases will in turn be able to hear the track, without having to search for it, or even directly visit the artist's page, as the alias appears as a single-track mini-player (Figure 4). Also included on the mini-player are a "View user's song history" button that provides a list of hyperlinks to the user's previously embedded songs, as well as a "View artist's profile" button that links visitors directly to the artist profile for the currently embedded track. To embed an audio track from a particular MySpace page visitors simply need to log into a valid MySpace account, and then click the "Add" hyperlink associated with the specific song they

<sup>131</sup> Personal screen capture: <http://www.myspace.com/clapyourhandssayyeah> (Retrieved: 16 February 2008).

wish to embed (assuming this feature has not been disabled by the musician). For music fans and interested listeners, the ability to embed tracks into their personal profiles is an easy, free, and legal way to share music discoveries or interests with “Friends” and others in MySpace. During a panel discussion titled “Social Networks and Music Discovery: What It Means for Music Businesses” at the 2008 Digital Music Forum in New York City, Ali Partovi, CEO of the social music discovery service iLike, underscored the importance of music sharing features like MySpace’s embeddable audio, saying: “When you find something you like, the first instinct is to share it with somebody else. ... It means social networks are here to stay. Email is a social network, IM is a social network, but MySpace and Facebook are better attuned to the types of behavior that humans want to do.”<sup>132</sup>

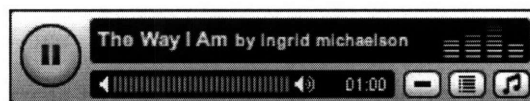


Figure 4: Embedded MySpace mini-player (Track: Ingrid Michaelson’s “The Way I Am”)<sup>133</sup>

While the processes involved in uploading, downloading, “Add”-ing, and sharing music in MySpace involve fairly trivial user operations, the implications for independent practitioners trying to find an audience, and make important business-related connections are potentially far reaching. For independent artists, enabling their audio tracks to be embedded and/or downloaded are very straightforward ways to give their music the opportunity to spread virally. While the effectiveness of such an approach is largely dependent on the uncertain word-of-mouth actions of fans, curious listeners, and other visitors, viral marketing is inherently about the “tactic of creating a process where interested people can market to each other,” which is increasingly “an important means to spread-the-word and stimulate the trial, adoption, and use of products and services.”<sup>134</sup> Echoing this, Alex Wipperfurth in his book *Brand Hijack*, contends that one of the main ways to get people excited about your brand – and to “hijack” it – is to “create a discovery” because when they “believe they have discovered a brand on their own, they feel ownership and want to share it with their friends.

<sup>132</sup> Buskirk, E.V. “Social Networks and Music Discovery: What It Means for Music Businesses.” *Wired* 26 February 2008.

<sup>133</sup> Personal screen capture: <http://www.myspace.com/ewendel> (Retrieved: 15 March 2008).

<sup>134</sup> Subramani, M.R. and B. Rajagopalan. “Knowledge-Sharing and Influence in Online Social Networks via Viral Marketing.” *Communications Of The ACM* 46:12 (2003): 300.

They are engaged by either being delighted or by being let in on a secret.”<sup>135</sup> Similar logic readily maps onto the discovery of new music (products) and new artists (brands). In this sense, unsigned, lesser-known artists have much to gain – and arguably little to lose – simply by allowing potential fans to circulate their music freely and fluidly within the MySpace network.

Loyal fans emerge when they are able to feel a deep, personal attachment to the music they come across. Giving users the option to embed music into their own personal profiles accomplishes this by allowing them the chance to share their discoveries with others. Providing MP3 downloads can take this uncontrolled approach to marketing even further, not only because visitors literally come to “own” the music (building loyalty), but also because the music can move about outside of MySpace, potentially being picked up by MP3 blogs, online music magazines, or other web-based centers of tastemaking. Although decisions over how their music circulates within MySpace are left up to the artists themselves – significant in terms of issues of control and freedom – the availability of effectively zero cost promotion and distribution opportunities to form strong, or loose connections with potential fans should be carefully considered, especially by less recognized artists.

To not exploit this basic provision of the social network creates conditions in which the sharing of music becomes non-trivial. It is always surprising to come across an unknown, unsigned artist using MySpace that only offers visitors streaming and/or pay-to-play options. If an individual cannot embed, or download a track, what happens if they forget the name of the artist, or the title of the track, or clear their web browser’s cache? That information will not be available on their personal profile (or their song history), and with over 5 million artists using MySpace, a happenstance, though possibly long-term connection might be lost forever. Julian Knowles argues that these sorts of conditions are precisely why “today’s music producer needs to understand the operation of Web 2.0 social networks and the ways in which producers can become connected to audiences and markets via such systems ... and how to position content in large systems so that those who may be interested in the

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<sup>135</sup> Wipperfurth, A. *Brand Hijack: Marketing Without Marketing, Summary*. Concordville, Pennsylvania: Soundview, 2005, 6.

material can locate it.”<sup>136</sup> By ceding some relatively minimal control over their content, artists can put listeners in the driver’s seat, and involve them in meaningful artist-to-fan, and by extension, fan-to-fan connections around music discovery.

Beyond free modes of sharing music, artists can also choose to monetize and sell tracks, albums, and other merchandise via MySpace. They can do this either directly or indirectly. In the case of the latter option, which is by far the most common method at the present time, artists simply provide hyperlinks within their profiles that direct visitors to distribution channels exterior to MySpace, like Amazon or iTunes, as well as slightly more niche-oriented retailers such as Insound, or record stores that maintain a web presence, which even includes the online Rough Trade shop. However, artists can also sell visitors music directly through their profile pages by using a third-party application called SNOCAP, Shawn Fanning’s post-Napster brainchild, the beta version of which was first made available to MySpace users in late July 2006.<sup>137</sup> SNOCAP is essentially an embedded digital music store akin to a small-scale version of iTunes. Unsigned artists can use SNOCAP for free (again, according to its terms and conditions) to host up to one thousand songs that visitors can then purchase through PayPal transactions. For many independent artists SNOCAP at first seemed like a wonderful, direct artist-to-fan/customer idea, with the tag line “Buy tracks directly from this artist,” but the plug-in has thus far had minimal success in revenue generation (either for itself, or the artists that use it).<sup>138</sup> The reasons for this are arguably twofold. First, unsigned artists are charged a “SNOCAP MyStore Transaction Fee Per Track” of \$0.39/download, meaning that altogether, for a typically priced \$0.99 track, an unsigned artist receives only \$0.60/download. While that might seem like a reasonable split for an unsigned artist – as seen in comparison Rough Trade’s 50/50 deals – that does not account for the obvious fact that SNOCAP provides them with absolutely no service other than a hosting and transaction system wherein visitors can purchase songs. The second reason SNOCAP has not been particularly great for independents is that many of these artists are relatively unknown, and few visitors are willing to shell out money for MP3s by an artist that they may have only just heard of (let alone artists they have), especially when plenty of others are sharing their music

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<sup>136</sup> Knowles, 23.

<sup>137</sup> Cashmore, P. “Snocap’s MySpace Music Player.” *Mashable* 26 July 2006.

<sup>138</sup> Stelter, B. “MySpace to Showcase Music and Sell Performance Videos.” *New York Times* 4 December 2007.

in MySpace freely. It is unlikely that the Black Kids' *Wizard of Abhhs* would have received as much outside attention had each of its four songs been offered for \$0.99/track as opposed to free. For independent artists using MySpace, the value of the platform resides mainly in its promotional capabilities.

But SNOCAP, like MySpace itself, is unrepresentative of the full range of possibilities for how music might be shared or sold as entrepreneurs, network developers and artists move forward. Indeed, a number of other monetization schemes are already in the works, including, though not limited to: Last-FM's ad-supported free streaming audio, where artists receive royalties generated from ad-revenue when their tracks are played; Sheeba Record's pay-what-you-want pricing models, where buyers can choose their own price, or even "Pay Later"; Groovespark's music sharing and sales service, where users that upload music to the site later receive a cut of the sale if and when uploaded tracks are purchased; Nine Inch Nails' multi-tiered pricing for its *Ghosts* project, with prices ranging from a free download of the first of *Ghosts*' four volumes, to \$300 for a limited edition collector's edition box set; as well as less radical music subscription services like Napster and Rhapsody. Another particularly interesting model was started in 2006, with online social network Amie Street gaining attention for its fan-driven, popularity model, where the price of songs/albums is reflective of demand. All tracks start out as free downloads, but as the number of downloads of a particular track increase the price also rises, eventually capping at a maximum of \$0.98. On February 26, 2008, thousands of tracks were made available on Amie Street by established independent record labels Beggars Group (current owner of Rough Trade), Matador, and Polyvinyl, in an effort to reach out to potential fans and customers in an alternative way.<sup>139</sup> In the not-too-distant future it is highly probable to expect the number of options for artists to share and sell music through their MySpace pages to increase dramatically. This comes after an October 2007 announcement that MySpace would open its platform in the coming year to any and all software developers interested in creating new applications and plug-ins that can be used in conjunction with the network to provide new functionalities. Read as a response that mirrors Facebook's similar strategy launched in May 2007, many of these third-party applications will likely provide a range of ever diversifying approaches for independent artists to market and distribute music within

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<sup>139</sup> Houghton, B. "Top Indie Artists Embrace AmieStreet's Fan Driven Pricing." *Hypebot.com* 26 February 2008.

MySpace.<sup>140</sup> An issue that will be returned to at the end of this chapter is the extent to which the input of artists, particularly independents, are considered or assigned value with respect to these new developments within the social network.

### **Everything But the Kitchen Sink (More Than Music)**

Though the focus of the previous section was largely on music, it is quite relevant to note that artists can also supplement their music by offering a wealth of additional content. Live, in studio, press and/or candid photos, along with personal, background and album-related artwork, as well as downloadable/streaming video can all be uploaded and incorporated into an artist's MySpace profile in a variety of ways. Fleshing out a profile with such content provides added value for potential fans to have richer experiences around an artist's music. Combined with posted tracks, artists can use these audio-visual elements to construct and maintain particular discursive, subcultural and independent identities. In the confines of offline networks much of this sort of artist-to-fan content delivery would have relied heavily on the production and distribution of tangible, recorded/printed goods (fan mail, fanzines, magazines, posters, video tapes, etc.), that are by default much more costly. Moreover, the participatory nature of MySpace's platform was not a characteristic of offline channels of communication. While artists like The Desperate Bicycles, Scritti Politti, and others relied greatly on traditional intermediaries like record labels, broadcast radio, fanzines, and brick-and-mortar record shops (Rough Trade's distribution channel) to share their creative efforts with audiences, today one finds the necessity of such third parties increasingly destabilized. Creative content can be delivered from artist to fan, all within MySpace.

Another feature of MySpace that differentiates it from many other online social networks, including Facebook and Last-FM, is its built-in customizability. What this means is that users have the ability to directly manipulate and edit the html (HyperText Markup Language) and CSS (Cascading Style Sheet) of their personal profile, so that they can alter the layout and graphical appearance of their MySpace profile. If they choose to do so, musicians can create and use customized layouts to further delineate a particular discursive identity, much

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<sup>140</sup> Arrington, M. "Counterstrike: Murdoch, DeWolfe Announce MySpace Platform and New Privacy Controls." *TechCrunch* 17 October 2007.

the same as self-designed album artwork functioned for many post-punk practitioners. When used in combination with other MySpace features already discussed, a polished, graphically sharp layout, or a visual style that is evocative of certain genres, moods, or emotions can add consistency to an overall marketing strategy to reach a specific audience. Unfortunately, for users that have minimal to no experience editing html, MySpace's bare-bones interface does not provide a particularly great learning environment (from personal experience, normally expected behavior is wildly unpredictable), and the customization process entails literacies that extend far beyond the design of album artwork or posters. However, there are many third party websites like [freecodesource.com](http://freecodesource.com), Ultimate MySpace, and Pimp My Profile that offer thousands of free, ready-made layouts, often created and uploaded by other users. To use these artists generally have to do little more than cut and paste html or CSS code from one text field to another. What is more, once users appropriate these layouts to their own profile they can subsequently remix those layouts too, by experimenting and tweaking the source code, molding them into their own creative expressions. Within the limits of MySpace's customization features, although not exceptionally well developed for the inexperienced end-user, artists are given a good deal of creative freedom to expressively shape their discursive identities within the network beyond their music alone. While Imeem provides similar functionality, other popular networks like Facebook and Last-FM do not. Artists within these networks are constrained to having profiles that structurally and visually appear very similar to those of other artists.

Beyond the audio-visual elements of MySpace's built-in features, there is also a "Blog" section which is used to varying degrees by musicians for professional and/or personal purposes. Entries tend to include anything from news about upcoming album release dates, new collaborations or side projects, and last-minute concert updates, to matters of personal interest that musicians want to share with fans, "Friends," and other MySpace users. One example of the latter is a rather tortuous post by UK pop artist Lily Allen in which she manages to discuss her new MacBook Air, a guest appearance by Cuba Gooding Junior on her BBC TV show, as well as some of her environmental concerns, all in a few short paragraphs. The post also includes an embedded YouTube video Allen felt was relevant to



energy crisis issues.<sup>141</sup> In response to inquisitive fans, the Black Kids used their MySpace blog to post official lyrics to their four song EP.<sup>142</sup> Colbie Caillat used her MySpace blog as a space to formally apologize to fans following UMG's earlier mentioned decision that forced its artists to remove all full-length streaming or downloadable songs from their MySpace profiles. Though now signed to Universal, Caillat first garnered widespread recognition through MySpace as an unsigned artist, and in a December 2007 MySpace blog post she acknowledged how important those initial fans were, saying: "I know you are all bummed out about the shortened song clips on my page. ... [I]t's because of you, my myspace fans, listening to my songs from day one, that I even got a chance to start this amazing career. ... I wish I could take it back to how it used to be!"<sup>143</sup> Users can respond to these posts and thereby publicly display their connection to artists. Certainly MySpace blogs can be used for very straightforward promotional purposes, but they also provide chances for artists and fans to connect on a more direct and personally meaningful level, even under less than ideal circumstances.

At this juncture it is important to understand that MySpace and the practices of independent musicians sharing/selling music and other content, customizing profiles, as well as communicating with fans via blog entries in the network are in no way guarantees of success. Just as record labels cannot assure viability, neither can MySpace – culturally or economically, short-term or long-term. However, the features and affordances of MySpace discussed thus far do offer a range of free, easy to use, and thereby more sustainable tools and approaches for initially entering into the music industry as an independent artist. The open, cost-free nature of the network, accompanied by the profound artistic control and freedom it provides, demarcates a social network that upholds and extends accessibility such that more participatory music cultures might flourish. Whereas entry into the music industry had once demanded adherence to certain dominant protocols, even in working with a progressive record label like Rough Trade, today many of these initial gatekeeping barriers to entry can be circumvented entirely. Musicians using MySpace are the sole decision makers, not needing to consult with anyone else, as artists working with Rough Trade's collective had

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<sup>141</sup> Allen, L. "It's Not Easy Being Green." *MySpace Blog* 11 February 2008.

<sup>142</sup> Black Kids. "Per Your Satanic Majesties Requests: Lyrics." *MySpace Blog* 14 November 2007.

<sup>143</sup> Caillat, C. "I Want You All to Know." *MySpace Blog* 7 December 2007.

to. With MySpace independent musicians readily avoid many of costly pitfalls that impeded the even small-scale, “one band, one label” operations. Practices and network structures that developed around a necessity to produce, market and distribute physical artifacts in real-space have given way to current “one band, one MySpace” approaches, where an online profile can function as promotional and distribution channels. But as already seen, MySpace’s present instantiation is far from perfect. The features and tools that artists are provided are necessarily constraining. They can only share six songs, not entire albums; formats for downloads are limited to MP3s; the size of video files is limited; and interfaces and behaviors for customization remain problematic. This is precisely why independent artists need to be aware of what works for them in the network, and what does not. Most significant here is the ability to connect with others in the networks, including artists, fans, critics, labels, and companies.

### **Making “Friends”/Fans**

Mark Vidler’s reasoning that the combined force of the Internet and the home computer translates into artists being able to do it *all* themselves, is most interesting when considered specifically in relation to an online social network like MySpace. What remains unclear with Vidler’s logic is the social element. How do today’s musicians form connections with other artists, labels, media companies, and most importantly fans? MySpace is one popular and intuitive way to foster these sorts of connections which are just as crucial for musicians seeking an audience today, as they always have been. When new artists register for an account, and create a profile, these profiles are by default constructed in an already expansive community of over 200 million general MySpace users, and more than 5 million artists. For artists, however known or unknown, they necessarily come to MySpace with sets of already established social relationships, both offline and online. These relationships form what might be best called a pre-existing community, which likely includes friends, family, fans, other artists, possible business-related contacts, and an array of additional loose associations. With MySpace’s near ubiquity in all sorts of music scenes, it is highly probable that an artist’s pre-existing community will be comprised of many individuals and groups that already use MySpace. Artists can draw upon these prior relationships to in turn establish a baseline set

of connections in MySpace through which a range of subsequent connections can hopefully start to emerge.

In contrast to the centralized nature of a record label, like Rough Trade, where artists are either “in” or “out,” MySpace is profoundly less umbrella-like and more decentralized. With millions of artists in MySpace at any given time – as opposed to the several dozen associated with independent labels like Rough Trade – the vast range of new connections individual artists, groups, and larger music communities can hypothetically form cannot be understated. It is in the context of networked culture, and diverse communities like MySpace, according to Yochai Benkler, that “we are beginning to see the emergence of greater scope for limited-purpose, loose relationships.” And these more fluid, “usually interest or practice based” connections “are detached from spatial constraints, and even time synchronicity.”<sup>144</sup> In music making, this is leading to all sorts of far-reaching, sometimes unpredictable artist-to-artist, artist-to-fan, artist-to-label, and artist-to-company connections/collaborations.

Before delving into concrete examples, it is pertinent to briefly address the ambiguous nature of “Friends” within MySpace. Appearing under the heading “[username’s] Friend Space,” there is a list in any profile that represents the connections a user has explicitly formed with others in the network. Some artists on MySpace have less than a dozen “Friends,” some have thousands (Mark Vidler, Black Kids), and others have over a million, such as R&B pop singer Rihanna or pop-punk artist Avril Lavigne.<sup>145</sup> Usually comprised of thumbnail images with hyperlinks that connect profiles together, the display of “Friends” according to danah boyd is potentially “misleading, because the connection does not necessarily mean friendship in the everyday vernacular sense, and the reasons people connect are varied.”<sup>146</sup> Barring an in-depth ethnographic methodology, there is no straightforward way of adequately assessing the strength of ties between “Friends.” The connections are effectively binary – network actors are either linked as “Friends” or they are not. In MySpace users can hypothetically arrange, or rank their top “Friends,” but fans, random visitors and/or researchers surveying a specific profile have no way of knowing if those “Friends” were consciously organized.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Benkler, 357.

<sup>145</sup> <http://www.myspace.com/rihanna>, <http://www.myspace.com/avrilavigne> (Retrieved: 13 March 2008)

<sup>146</sup> boyd and Ellison, 3.

<sup>147</sup> danah boyd had similarly noted the difficulty in assessing Friends within the online social network

And even if they were, there is still no certainty if the visible arrangement is actually a measure of friendship. In relation to music however, “Friends” in MySpace are colloquially treated as being synonymous with fans, with boyd noting the mutual benefit for artists and fans.<sup>148</sup> Fans are able to display a public connection of interest/affiliation and artists are able to show off their fan-base to attract other users.<sup>149</sup> The logic goes that more “Friends” corresponds to some measure of popularity, or even success, with some initial quantitative research seeming to support the latter. As a recent NYU Business School study on social networks, blog buzz, and their implications for album sales has suggested, a larger number of “Friends” bears a discernable correlation to an increase in album sales, though markedly less of an increase in comparison to that resulting from widespread blog buzz.<sup>150</sup> Since my approach to MySpace is qualitative, it is important to be mindful that although “Friends” certainly represent connections between users, the strengths and types of those connections – whether fandom, friendship, or both, personal or professional – remain difficult to meaningfully assess. Some connections may not even be traceable to an artist or user’s “Friends” list.

One aspect of “Friends” that intriguingly parallels post-punk’s demystification of the artist is the fact that within MySpace, fans and artists intermingle with one another side-by-side. The appearance of artist thumbnails and those of other users within the “Friend Space” of any profile are exactly the same. This mixing of fans and artists, such that they are presented as equivalents, recalls Geoff Travis’ earlier conception of Rough Trade as a space not populated by “artists,” but instead “simply a place where people are trying to do their work,” namely, the cultural production and sharing of music. But offline, small-scale social networks like record labels still maintained certain barriers to entry, as the label could not take on an endless number of artists due to financial limitations. Even making your own record thirty years ago – as groups like The Desperate Bicycles, The Buzzcocks, and Scritti Politti had done – involved non-negligible financial investments. BBC Radio 1 DJ John Peel’s claim

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Friendster. See: boyd, d. “Friendster and Publicly Articulated Social Networks.” *Conference on Human Factors and Computing Systems (CHI 2004)*. Vienna: ACM, April 24-29, 2004.

<sup>148</sup> Searches on MySpace for a particular artist actually refers to the number of Fans, rather than Friends, even though the artist profile still displays this as a list of “Friends.”

<sup>149</sup> boyd and Ellison, 8.

<sup>150</sup> Dhar, V. and E. Chang. “Does Chatter Matter? The Impact of User-Generated Content on Music Sales.” CeDER Working Paper No. 07-06, 24 October 2007.

that making your own record during the late-1970s was “an amount any band could afford if the bass player sold their motorbike and the rest of the band robbed a few telephone boxes,” though intended as an enthusiastic encouragement, underscored the fact that making a record was not risk-free, and might require some illicit activity.<sup>151</sup> And this did not even address how a record would be distributed. For all intents and purposes, MySpace eliminates such gatekeeping, and manufacturing costs, thereby blurring artist/fan distinctions considerably more than was the case during the post-punk moment. Fans who previously understood themselves as mere consumers of music, now have a simple, free way to share their own creative efforts within an expansive community. When anyone can participate, fans and artists, amateurs and professionals, can quickly become one and the same. Given the problematic nature of assessing “Friends” on the inspection alone, the following section looks at specific examples of social connections arising through MySpace.

### Connecting and Collaborating

In terms of artist-to-artist connections, UK music producer D-Boy – who infuses hip-hop and soul with elements of Bhangra and Bollywood – intimately understands the role MySpace can play in the formation of interesting collaborations. In an interview discussing his forthcoming 2008 album *Playback*, D-Boy describes MySpace as a “revolution for music worldwide,” especially on the social-side, insofar as it “offers a huge range of music communities for both music lovers and music makers to connect and interact.” As for his own work, D-Boy’s *Playback* now features a number contributions from what he calls “new and innovative” artists that he first connected with through MySpace, including fellow London hip-hop artists A G Dolla and Pyrelli.<sup>152,153</sup> In similar fashion, the multi-artist collaboration known as The Turbo Crunk posse formed following a series of impromptu MySpace connections. Made up of the Montreal-based electronic, crunk, and hip-hop outfits Megasoid, Mofomatronix, Blingmod and Lunice, these artists were effectively dissociated from one another until the popular social network brought them together.

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<sup>151</sup> Rosen, 5.

<sup>152</sup> Morris, D. “Caught in the Web.” *The Voice Online* 6 December 2007.

<sup>153</sup> <http://www.theplayback.co.uk/>

Lunice, though somewhat circuitously, conveys the importance of the sorts of loose, fluid connections that MySpace enables, saying:

“I was experimenting with a lot of different kinds of beats. I found Hudson Mohawke, I was like, wow, that’s insane. I check out his top friends, I see Rustie, I check Rustie and I find out that everybody is from frickin’ [*sic*] Scotland. And then Rustie put me on his top friends. Then Hovatron [of Mofomatronix] finds me and is, like, we’re from Montreal. So it went from MySpace to Glasgow, Scotland to, ‘What the fuck kind of beat are they doing, that’s insane!’ to seeing that we go to the same school to asking me if I could play with them at one of their shows.”<sup>154</sup>

Interestingly, here one sees the potential usefulness of the ranking structure of “Friends,” such that a successive series of connections can form, but smoothness and predictability again remain impossible to assess. If a single link in the connective chain had been broken – for instance if Rustie had not put Lunice in his top friends – then the eventual connection between Lunice and Hovatron could just as easily never have happened. MySpace requires an active role of artists on almost every level. Collaborations are also by no means restricted to particular genres. It is happening in almost any music scene one can imagine, including death metal, where even this somewhat subcultural scene has over 180,000 artists with MySpace profiles. Erik Rutan, of the St. Petersburg, Florida death metal group Hate Eternal, recently found and hired drummer Jade Simonetto after meeting up through MySpace. Rutan had actively been on the prowl for a new drummer to work with for the group’s upcoming 2008 album *Fury & Flames*, and that’s when Jade contacted him. According to Rutan: “When [Jade] contacted me online he said he knew the songs, was a huge fan, and we needed a drummer to try out. He sent me some video of himself playing the songs and it was awesome. He came down and we jammed.”<sup>155</sup> And Jade came down all the way from Quebec. Without prior spatial constraints impinging connective possibilities, there are new degrees of freedom, as well as the emergence of unexpected, diverse artistic collaborations.

Aside from artist-to-artist collaborations, there are also numerous instances of artists developing followings through MySpace and eventually attracting the attention of various types of media companies, even record labels. Briefly mentioned very early on in this project, but relevant to the current conversation, is the success story of unsigned female pop

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<sup>154</sup> Macleod, E. “Chimeral Reactions” *Montreal Mirror* 14-20 February 2008.

<sup>155</sup> Stosuy, B. “Column: Show No Mercy.” *Pitchfork* 27 February 2008.

artist Ingrid Michaelson, based in New York City. Having completed her second full-length album *Girls and Boys* in 2006 and trying to find a wider audience, Michaelson opted to try the MySpace route. Doing what any sensible musician would do with the tools readily available to them, she uploaded six tracks from the album to share on her public profile. Michaelson soon discovered that other artists and potential fans are by no means the only valuable connections the popular social network might have to offer. A&R scouts for record labels, and various media companies are increasingly turning to MySpace as a source of new talent. Lynn Grossman, owner of Secret Road in Los Angeles – a music licensing and artist management company – came across Michaelson’s profile and was immediately drawn in by her song “Breakable.”<sup>156</sup> Grossman contacted Michaelson about the possibility of having one of her songs featured on the prime-time drama *Grey’s Anatomy*, and the relationship developed from there. Initially Grossman devised a three-year plan for Michaelson, but within just ten short months all of the goals laid out in that plan, and quite a bit more had been accomplished. Old Navy selected Michaelson’s song “The Way I Am” for a TV commercial spot; she became the first unsigned artist to appear on VH1 as part of its artist discovery program; numerous radio stations across the country added her songs to their playlists; and *Grey’s Anatomy* ended up featuring not just one, but three songs from *Girls and Boys*. She was even asked to write an original song (“Keep Breathing”) specifically for the show, which was eventually played during the concluding minutes of the May 2007 season finale. With such a high-degree of success – ostensibly stemming from connections first established through MySpace – Michaelson has decided to remain unsigned for the time being, at least until she finds a label that can do something for her that she cannot do on her own. And as an independent artist, this leaves her in a powerful negotiating position if and when she decides to work with, not for a record label.

Other artists have also had somewhat similar experiences where sharing their music on their MySpace profiles attracted the attention of music critics and the ears of potential business contacts. Jwl B. (Jewel Baynham) and Shunda K (LaShunda Flowers) of Tampa-based hip-hop duo Yo Majesty, purposefully used MySpace as a way to reconnect with old fans and form new relationships following an almost three year hiatus prior to their comeback with 2006’s *Yo* EP. Their growing MySpace popularity, and increasing recognition on the

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<sup>156</sup> Sipher, D. “Singing Her Way From Obscurity to Fame on the Internet.” *New York Times* 18 December 2007.

underground club scene, attracted the attention of independent label Domino Records, which is now poised to release the group's forthcoming debut full-length in 2008.<sup>157</sup> Likewise, the already mentioned Black Kids, after building an initial MySpace following, eventually found themselves the subject of much blog buzz and a subsequent review of their EP by online tastemaking site, *Pitchfork* branding it "Best New Music" in October 2007. *The New York Times*, *NME*, and *The Village Voice* added to the hype, and by the time the 2007 CMJ Music Marathon in New York rolled around they were "one of a handful of must-sees," according to music critic Jon Pareles.<sup>158</sup> Even more well-known top-40 artists like Colbie Caillat and Lily Allen have both personally attributed much of their initial success to first being discovered through the popular social network, despite eventually signing deals with major labels UMG and Capitol, respectively.<sup>159,160</sup> All sorts of artists are using MySpace to connect not only with fans and listeners – especially through the sharing of music – but also with other artists, labels and media companies, as they look to develop larger audiences. The initial processes involved in being able to share music and connect to a wider audience, no longer requires more traditional sets of production practices, brick-and-mortar distribution channels, and record label relationships. At the start it can be as straightforward as uploading some songs, allowing them to be shared, and reaching out to available music communities in networks like MySpace. However, with more and more musicians on MySpace everyday, the task of establishing a baseline of meaningful connections to build off from requires that independent artists strategically utilize the available creative and connective affordances of the network.

### Going Live With MySpace

Another piece of the MySpace puzzle that is receiving increasing attention is its usefulness not only in sharing music recordings in an online space, but also in managing the offline, live exhibition of music. One feature tied to this is the "Upcoming Shows" section of an artist's MySpace Music profile where pertinent where-and-when information for scheduled live concerts/performances can be listed. This basic feature is arguably equally critical for

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<sup>157</sup> Shepherd, J. "Hip-Hop's Newest Faces: Indie, Fierce and Female." *New York Times* 28 January 2008.

<sup>158</sup> Pareles, J. "Play Well, and May the Blog Buzz Be With You." *New York Times* 22 October 2007.

<sup>159</sup> Bazley, L. "Colbie Caillat: 'I Owe MySpace.'" *InTheNews* 28 November 2007.

<sup>160</sup> Plagenhoef, S. "Interview: Lily Allen." *Pitchfork* 6 November 2006.



independent artists as they seek to interact with current fans and establish connections with new ones. The idea of MySpace as a relatively all-in-one tool set is extended even further here. Visitors to an artist's profile can hear songs that pique their interest and, if the artist has made concert information available, immediately determine whether there are any upcoming performances nearby, without ever having to navigate to another webpage. Interestingly, this is an instance where MySpace's network is structured such that the online world can potentially intersect with offline spaces. When music and relevant concert information circulate along separate, sometimes isolated promotional channels, the burden is placed on potential fans. This can be quite discouraging, since almost by default, they must be the much more active party in establishing any sort of longer-term fan-to-artist relationship. Independent artists, though perhaps only attempting to develop a small niche audience, should nevertheless be mindful of establishing social networking processes that facilitate cooperative fan and artist interactions, particularly when the basic affordances to do so are present. If forced to visit alternate artist, venue, or record label websites, or even rely on more centralized channels of communication (radio, magazines, fanzines, etc.) – which independent artists may well have limited access to – potential fans might be lost. With MySpace's "Upcoming Shows" section, a direct artist-to-fan promotional channel can be established.

Concerts and live performances are becoming increasingly important for many independent artists as the falling costs of music production and distribution continue to push the logics of the music industry increasingly away from what Byrne calls "the business of selling CDs in plastic cases." The price of a CD/album, even at an iTunes standard of \$9.99, is difficult to justify when it's fairly common knowledge that the same content on those CDs can be uploaded and circulated online for next to nothing. However, as self-described music futurists David Kusek and Gerd Leonhard have been careful to point out, the *record* industry is by no means the same as the *music* industry, and despite the ongoing decline of CD sales, "the music industry as a whole is alive and well."<sup>161</sup> The record industry is essentially in the business of producing CDs, and therefore only represents a small fraction of the overall music industry, and this fraction is shrinking day-by-day. Music publishing, event merchandising, live entertainment, and especially concerts and touring, all combined – rather

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<sup>161</sup> Kusek, D. and G. Leonhard. *The Future of Music*. Boston: Berklee Press, 2005, 21.

than CD sales alone – account for a more accurate representation of the overall value of the music industry.<sup>162</sup> And as Kusek and Leonhard also note, historically speaking, a high-percentage of a music group's overall revenue generation will come from concerts and music publishing, rather than album sales, which are usually subject to rather unfavorable royalty splits already discussed in chapter two.<sup>163</sup>

*New York Times* music critic Melina Ryzik has written about the usefulness of MySpace when it comes to artists supplying up-to-date concert information in order to get fans and newcomers out to concerts. A particularly compelling example is what indie-rock group the Yeah Yeah Yeahs did in earlier May 2007. They used MySpace bulletins – which are essentially email-style messages that once sent go out to everyone in the group's MySpace "Friends" list – as well as several posts on music related blogs, to alert fans to an exclusive live performance at the GlassLands Gallery in Brooklyn. The show was intimate, with only about 100 attendees, and it is part of growing trend in which musicians are arranging "cheap, on-the-fly, do-it-yourself" concerts promoted through social networks like MySpace.<sup>164</sup> And this sort of tactic is by no means new. Writing two years prior, David Cohn of *Wired* discussed the ways that artists were "using the site to build massive social networks and spread the word about upcoming shows..." The Portland, Oregon synth-pop group Workout is given as an illustrative example of how artists use "MySpace not only to get a free website, but to network with MySpace bands in other cities."<sup>165</sup> According to Jason Langdon, Workout's keyboard player, "There's no better introduction than, 'Hey, you are in a band in City X and I am in a band in City Y, let's trade off playing shows together.'"<sup>166</sup> Where independent musicians once relied heavily on record labels to arrange tours by mailing out traditional press kits, as well as on relationships with particular venues, artists using social networks like MySpace are leveraging their profiles as an alternative, direct way to connect with fans, other artists, venues and even book gigs, both locally and nationally.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>164</sup> Ryzik, M. "Off the Beaten Beat." *New York Times* 11 May 2007.

<sup>165</sup> Cohn. "Bands Embrace Social Networking."

<sup>166</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Mottola, P. "Bands Can Manage Booking Shows on MySpace." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 1 February 2008.

With MySpace Music profiles independent artists can to some extent let their music market their concerts as well as their discursive identities. This is especially true when artists opt to let users download their tracks as MP3s. By giving something away, artists are planting the seeds for a longer-term social relationship between artist and fan, and maybe even getting them to come to a concert. According to e-tribe market researcher Robert Kozinets, “A simple marketing rule emerging in the digital economy is that networks are what build value, and networks are often created by giving things away. That was the pattern that led to Netscape’s early success, and countless other shareware and freeware standards.”<sup>168,169</sup>

Although citing other examples, such as Microsoft’s Internet Explorer, some music related ones would certainly include platforms like MySpace as well as streaming Internet radio sites/applications like Last-FM and the more proprietary Pandora, not to mention early versions of Napster. Though Kozinets was not referring to the music industry specifically, his understanding was echoed several years later in a 2003 *Salon* article penned by John and Ben Snyder, aptly titled “Embrace File-sharing, or Die.” In it, John – an industry insider who has worked at CTI, A&M, and Atlantic Records – and son Ben advocated for free music file-sharing, arguing: “When people share MP3s, more music is sold, not less.” And music, recall, goes far beyond recorded music (CDs or MP3s). They write: “MP3s are the greatest marketing tool ever to come along for the music industry. If your music is not being downloaded, then you’re in trouble. If you can’t give it away, you certainly can’t sell it.”<sup>170</sup>

By distributing their *Wizard of Abhhs* EP freely through their MySpace page, the Black Kids implicitly used their music as their marketing strategy. Other artists are doing the same, such as Akron, Ohio blues duo The Black Keys which also freely released their four song *The Live* EP through MySpace in 2007. And in 2005, the Brooklyn indie-pop group Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, released their self-titled debut, and immediately made the album’s two singles downloadable from their profile. Kozinets further argues that “giving things away allows marketers to build loyalty and trust and allows the company to make their margins on

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<sup>168</sup> Kozinets, R. “E-Tribalized Marketing?” *European Management Journal* 17.3 (1999): 263.

<sup>169</sup> E-tribes, or electronic tribes, are essentially groups or communities that form through online connections, and do so largely around particular sets of ideas and/or interests. Importantly, e-tribes and their actions can have socio-cultural, political, and economic consequences both online and off.

<sup>170</sup> Snyder, J. and B. Snyder. “Embrace File-Sharing or Die.” *Salon* 2 February 2003.

what is difficult for others to copy.”<sup>171</sup> Artists can build loyalty similarly. What is difficult for others to copy is not the music, or the MP3s, but the performative and discursive identities of the musicians themselves. Today, according to Kusek and Leonhard, “*artists* are the brands, and *entertainment* is the main attraction.”<sup>172</sup> Live performance entails more personal, often face-to-face social experiences – being at a particular venue, with a certain friend or group of friends, for a special occasion, at a specific time of year, and having a certain musical experience grounded in the atmosphere created by the artists and their performance. Sharing music via MySpace is an effective way to draw potential fans into these rich social experiences, where music shifts from being a commodity object to a conduit for the social. Certainly MySpace is partly about music, but at its core it is about social connections which frequently form around music and other content. Music becomes the enabler of connection between artist and fan. As independent musicians continue to attempt to operate outside of normative discourses and logics that defined the music industry for much of the 20th century – by instead using social networks like MySpace – there is an increasing need to understand the multi-purpose role of music and effective strategies they can utilize in trying to reach out to an audience.

Inevitably DIY-oriented practitioners, whether by choice or circumstance, generally do not have the capital-based marketing resources of record labels or other media companies. In trying to build loyal fan-bases independent artists need to begin to develop their own social networks much more from the ground-up. Networks like MySpace – which has from its inception had a music slant – with its participatory and community building affordances, locates unprecedented creative control in the hands of music makers themselves. But the burden of forming initial and business-related connections is placed overwhelmingly on the artist, creating many of the same tensions seen during the post-punk moment between desires to ascribe to certain ideals and discursive identities and the concurrent aim to expand to a larger audience. While Rough Trade was not an openly accessible social network, internally it provided many practitioners a balance between artistic ideals and a range of other, more business-side benefits – financial backing, promotional and distribution channels, as well as credibility – that allowed them to reach out to more fans than would

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<sup>171</sup> Kozinets, 263.

<sup>172</sup> Kusek and Leonhard, 21. Original emphasis.

have been possible on their own. For contemporary independents, MySpace certainly offers promotional and distribution channels, as well as the ability to articulate online identities, but what good are these provisions if no one is listening? Reception and appreciation both remain essential to the cultural production of music.

While the openness of MySpace is often considered one of its greatest attributes, especially for unsigned artists, it can also prove to be one of the most problematic aspects of the social network for the same set of artists. Eric Harvey, critic for the now defunct online music magazine, *Stylus*, highlights the latter point, saying: “The axiom ‘good music sells itself’ is hardly true: nothing sells without gaining notice in the market, and the Web is the most crowded market in history.”<sup>173</sup> Benkler and others have subsumed these sorts of criticisms broadly as part of what is referred to as the Babel objection, the basic argument of which is that within today’s networked culture “when everyone can speak, no one can be heard,” whereby “we devolve either to a cacophony or to the reemergence of money as the distinguishing factor between statements that are heard and those that wallow in obscurity.”<sup>174</sup> The same criticism maps to music, and underlines the idea that independent musicians using MySpace must be extremely hard-working, even tireless in exploiting network affordances to their fullest in order to market themselves and their music. But even that is in all likelihood not enough if the goal is to reach a wider audience. With approximately 5 million artists, and over 200 million users on MySpace, independent musicians must also actively reach out to channels beyond MySpace such as MP3 blogs (where their music has the chance to be reviewed and disseminated to an alternate set of listeners), online music magazines, and even traditional channels, such as radio and printed publications. These are all important systems of tastemaking that can resonate with MySpace. Both *Pitchfork* and *Stylus* for example, at the end of virtually every album review, provide hyperlinks to artist MySpace profiles (which it seems that just about every artist under the sun has). Furthermore, artists may need to expand to other online social networks for additional exposure, of which there are many. A June 2007 post on social networking news site *Mashable* mentioned a dozen social networks beyond the most “obvious one,” namely MySpace, which, based on its sheer scope alone, “remains the hub for music on the

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<sup>173</sup> Harvey, E. “Priming-the-Pump.” *Stylus* 22 January 2007.

<sup>174</sup> Benkler, 10.

web.”<sup>175</sup> From Last-FM and MOG, to Sellaband and iLike, its clear these networks are thriving, and if “you’re in a band, these sites are essential for promoting your music: take note, and sign up for as many as possible to maximize your reach.”<sup>176</sup> To find an audience today – just as was the case thirty years ago – there is continuing need to move beyond the idealistic rhetoric that you can truly do it *all* yourself. Artists depend on their fans and audiences as well as the multifaceted array of other connections that allow them to more effectively reach those fans. Looking to other networks, old and new, can provide more opportunities than ever before for independent artists and artists more generally.

### Looking Back

To reiterate from the introduction, this project is primarily an exploration of changing meanings and potentials for independent music making, specifically in the context of two distinct social networks – Rough Trade and MySpace. I have tried to consider how a range of ideals closely linked to notions of independence during the post-punk moment – namely, access and participation, artistic autonomy, as well as community and collaboration – have transitioned from a decidedly offline space to today’s networked culture. As with the case study of Rough Trade this chapter has not been overly concerned with issues tied to success or viability in the music industry, but rather with how a network like MySpace positions practitioners and structures connective and creative possibilities, as well as discursive identities and notions of what it means to be independent.

At the surface level, MySpace reads as having pushed many post-punk ideals much further than was the case with Rough Trade. Although MySpace and the artists that use it are still centrally involved in the cultural production, promotion and distribution of music, the protocols of those processes increasingly bear little resemblance to earlier normative practices (the creation of recorded objects), and one-to-many channels of communication. In contrast to Rough Trade, MySpace is representative of more a stepping outside, rather than a reshaping of prior dominant discourses, where independent artists in the music

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<sup>175</sup> Iacolare, L. “Rock On: 12 of the Best Music Social Networks.” *Mashable* 22 June 2007.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. The basic features of the following twelve music social networks are discussed: Flotones, Mercora Radio 2.0, MOG, Last-FM, iLike, JamNow, MusoCity, HayStack, Sonific, Midomi, ijigg, and Sellaband.

industry today can sustain more autonomy from traditional intermediaries than ever before while also potentially reaching an audience. MySpace provides a freely accessible, all-in-one tool set – albeit with limited capabilities – along with fundamental ownership rights, such that practitioners can oversee the music making process from creation to distribution (and even sale). Moreover, the open, participatory nature of the platform – where users, fans and musicians operate seamlessly alongside one another – has resulted in a previously unimaginable diversity of genres and styles from all over the globe. Finally, unconstrained by spatial barriers, unexpected collaborations and useful connections can crop up through direct, one-to-one communication almost anywhere at any time. If we were to stop here, at the surface, we might be inclined to conclude that some idealized form of independence, or a complete “do-it-yourself” autonomy had finally arrived. However, as Benkler makes clear, “The networked public sphere is not made of tools, but of *social* production practices that these tools enable” (emphasis added).<sup>177</sup>

MySpace is a social network first and foremost and the artists that use it depend most crucially on that social element – the enablements of the network to connect with fans, other artists, listeners, concert venues, record labels, music critics, MP3 blogs, and various media companies. Artists have always relied on what Howard Becker calls “cooperative networks” to bring their art to completion, from conception to reception.<sup>178</sup> But if the enablements of the network are limited in accomplishing that task – partly the nature of emerging, ephemeral network structures and technologies like those of MySpace – what is the independent practitioner’s role in being able to address these limitations moving forward? Rough Trade had instituted a cooperative internal model, where artists worked *with* the label in shaping the identity and practices of the overall social network. With respect to MySpace there is no discernable corollary. Bragg’s successful campaign against problematic licensing rights in the network’s terms and conditions certainly represents one instance of an artist’s actions influencing the social network, though a protest is at best a tenuous example of cooperation between parties. Although MySpace does not at all resemble traditional music industry intermediaries like record labels, it nevertheless is an intermediary – what tech

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<sup>177</sup> Benkler, 219.

<sup>178</sup> Becker, 1, 2-4.

journalist Josh Catone at *ReadWriteWeb* has referred to as the “web’s label.”<sup>179</sup> What is still missing however is the interaction between artist and intermediary. Put simply, there appears to be minimal if any artist-to-MySpace interaction – that is, relationships between artists and executives, managers, designers, software developers, along with others that oversee implementation of the platform.

While this does not necessarily mean that those responsible for the development of MySpace are not mindful of the interests of artists that use the network (and how they might want to use it), it does undermine notions that the social production practices of artists and users within MySpace are truly what is valuable, as opposed to the platform and its tools. After all if the artists and other users are what provides MySpace with its value, where is their input? Though not talking about musicians specifically, boyd has broached this issue before, saying: “There is a master behind the architecture... People know this. They have to trust that the creators [of MySpace] have their best intentions in mind.”<sup>180</sup> Looking back to Rough Trade however, one sees artist resistance to similar logic in the context of major record labels. Part of what came out of post-punk notions of independence was a critique of the mainstream music industry, and through it different sets of power relations as well as a valuation of alternative practices emerged. This effort to place value in alternative practice and position artists in a more dialectic relationship with the social networks they rely upon is just as important today as it was thirty years ago. If MySpace is to continue offering musicians ever more useful, compelling, and potentially alternative ways to connect with fans and audiences – and thereby build their own collaborative networks – it is important that musicians be able to work with MySpace, just as artists had been able to work with Rough Trade. For independent practitioners especially, there is an ongoing need to not only be aware of existing network structures and affordances, but also to be mindful of their positionality insofar as they may or may not have opportunities to be actively involved in processes that might determine or reshape those structures.

This is particularly relevant given MySpace CEO Chris DeWolfe’s announcement in early April 2008 that the social network would soon be launching a full-scale music service as part

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<sup>179</sup> Catone, J. “MySpace Music Store: Where’s the Long Tail?” *ReadWriteWeb* 3 April 2008.

<sup>180</sup> boyd, d. “Friendster Lost Steam. Is MySpace Just a Fad?” *Apophenia Blog*, 21 March 2006.



of a joint venture with three of the four major labels, UMG, Sony BMG, and Warners as minority owners (with EMI still negotiating).<sup>181</sup> Although the exact outcome of the venture is difficult to predict, what remains precariously uncertain is where independent labels and more importantly unsigned artists that use MySpace are situated in relation to these changes. How will their input be considered? Initial reports suggest that this new instantiation of MySpace Music will be directed by a group of executives that report to representatives of both MySpace and the major labels involved. The situation then risks being one in which the enablements of the network are wholly determined by powerful media institutions, rather than the practitioners that use the network. With MySpace's near ubiquity amongst musicians today, its ownership by media conglomerate News Corp., and its emerging alliances with the major labels, what then are the possibilities that alternate dominant discourses will emerge in the networked public sphere? Will certain practices and identities be given value, or treated more favorably while others are marginalized? With the music industry more chaotic than ever, independent-minded practitioners have much to gain through a revisitation of post-punk critiques of media power. This may entail direct engagements with existing networks like MySpace – as was the case with Bragg – or it might best be undertaken through the establishment of alternate, online social networks that offer greater valuation of contemporary independent discursive practices. As MySpace comes to represent the mainstream, and perhaps a dominant model for the industry, the latter option may be more meaningful to evolving conceptions of independence. In either case, music making is inevitably about more than creation alone, it is also about the conditions in which music is shared and appreciated. Realization of alternatives in today's convergent environment of offline and online networks still requires action.

The concluding chapter turns to a further consideration of old and new networks and where and how they might intersect in this transitional moment.

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<sup>181</sup> Leeds, J. and B. Stone. "Three Record Companies Team Up With MySpace for Music Web Site." *New York Times* 4 April 2008.



## Coda: The Future of “Independent” Music?

Well you're in your little room  
 And you're working on something good  
 But if it's really good  
 You're gonna need a bigger room  
 And when you're in the bigger room  
 You might not know what to do  
 You might have to think  
 Of how you got started  
 Sitting in your little room

– The White Stripes<sup>182</sup>

On October 10, 2007, the internationally popular and critically acclaimed alt-rock group Radiohead released their seventh full-length album, *In Rainbows*. All six of the group's preceding albums had been produced, marketed and distributed through relatively traditional media channels and contractual arrangements with Capitol Records, a subsidiary of British major label EMI. In sharp contrast to Radiohead's earlier releases however, fans, music critics, industry insiders, and technology journalists were initially much less preoccupied with any music-related hype surrounding *In Rainbows*.<sup>183</sup> Instead the focus was on how the new album had been released – what *New York Times*' music critic Jon Pareles called “the most audacious experiment in years” – and how it might well be representative of an impending sea change in the music industry.<sup>184</sup> After rejecting offers from a number of major labels, Radiohead opted to go-it-alone, self-releasing *In Rainbows* under their own imprint, \_Xurbia \_Xendless Ltd. Moreover, the group charted seemingly new waters, employing a rather unusual digital distribution model for the album, a veritable “pay us what you think it's worth” schema where buyers could literally name their own price.

To “purchase” *In Rainbows*, individuals simply had to navigate to the stand-alone webpage created for the album's release, <http://www.inrainbows.com>, which went live for preorders on October 1, 2007. Here one encountered a fairly rudimentary, but intuitive interface through which they could place an order for the album, either in MP3 format, or as a deluxe

<sup>182</sup> From “Little Room” on The White Stripes – *White Blood Cells* [Sympathy for the Record Industry; 2001]

<sup>183</sup> Ryzik, M. “Radiohead Fans, Guided by Conscience (and Budget).” *New York Times* 4 October 2007.

<sup>184</sup> Pareles, J. “Pay What You Want For This Article.” *New York Times* 9 December 2007.

“DISCBOX” (including vinyl, CDs with bonus tracks, artwork and other value-added goodies). In the case of the digital option, fans/customers could choose to pay as much as £99.99 (approximately \$212), or on the alternate extreme, absolutely nothing (Figure 5). Regardless of the entered price the end result was the same: a download of all ten tracks

The screenshot shows a pricing interface with a dark background and white text. At the top, there are three columns: 'ITEM', 'QTY', and 'PRICE'. Below this, a row shows 'DOWNLOAD' as the item, '1' as the quantity, and a price of '£ 0 : 45' where the '0' and '45' are in white text boxes. To the right of the price is a question mark and an 'X'. Below this row, a 'SUBTOTAL' is shown as '£ 0.45'. At the bottom, there are four buttons: 'HOME', 'UPDATE BASKET', 'EMPTY BASKET', and 'PAY NOW'. Below these buttons is a 'CURRENCY CONVERTOR' button.

Figure 5: Pricing interface for *In Rainbows*. Fans could enter a pound:pence amount of their choosing into the white text fields.<sup>185</sup>

featured on the new album. During its first four weeks the *In Rainbows* website attracted roughly 1.2 million unique visitors according to the Internet data aggregation group comScore, Inc. About 40 percent of those who purchased the album contributed an average of \$6, and without the traditional intermediary of a label skimming a high-percentage royalty off the top, the band took home an impressive net profit of nearly \$3 million. The other 60 percent of downloaders didn't pay a dime, getting the same album for free.<sup>186</sup>

In a nutshell: No record label, an experimental distribution model, a whole lot of buzz, and pretty significant business for an “independent” artist.<sup>187</sup>

<sup>185</sup> Personal screen capture from <http://www.inrainbows.com> (Retrieved: 8 October 2007); though the site still exists, the download option was discontinued on 10 December 2007, in the run up to the January CD release.

<sup>186</sup> Veiga, A. “Most Fans Paid \$0 for Radiohead Album.” *USA Today* 6 November 2007.

<sup>187</sup> As mentioned earlier in chapter three, Radiohead does in fact maintain a frequented MySpace Music profile, but MySpace was not used to distribute their new album; hyperlinks on their MySpace page were provided to direct visitors to the *In Rainbows* website.

But is this the promising future of independent music?

Even before the release of *In Rainbows*, Radiohead frontman Thom Yorke suggested as much when he offered up his own polemical opinions on the current state of the music industry. In an interview with John Tyrangiel of *TIME Magazine*, Yorke directly disputed the necessity of record labels today, stating: “I like the people at our record company, but the time is at hand when you have to ask why anyone needs one. And, yes, it probably would give [Radiohead] some perverse pleasure to say ‘F#@! you’ to this decaying business model.”<sup>188</sup> Exactly why anyone needs a label, or more accurately the social network(s) of a label, is an extremely relevant and complex question, and one which this thesis has in part sought to understand more critically, particularly as it resonates with notions of independence in music making. One could just as easily ask why anyone needs an online social network like MySpace? While no artist technically *needs* a record label or a MySpace profile, as has been seen the affordances provided by these two types of social networks are quite useful, especially in developing audiences (large or small), forming business-side relationships, as well as constructing discursive, independent identities. Unfortunately, Yorke’s rhetorical hand waving – itself an exercise in using independence as a tool for positioning – and popular press interpretations of *In Rainbows* as “easily the most important release in the recent history of the music business,” fail to sufficiently address the heart of the matter.<sup>189</sup> Being overlooked is an extremely important, and arguably obvious piece of the puzzle: Radiohead’s history, and specifically the role that the social network(s) of a major record label had in shaping that history.

Radiohead was only able to generate massive blog buzz, ongoing press coverage, and attract over one million visitors to their new album’s website, all without a record label, precisely because of who they are and where they had come from. The group cannot be disentangled from their past. Doing so would ignore the many factors that allowed *In Rainbows* to rapidly garner so much attention in the first place. For nearly 15 years, starting with their 1993 debut album *Pablo Honey*, the group utilized the availability of Capitol Record’s vast social network and its attendant business connections (including producers, managers, marketers,

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<sup>188</sup> Quoted in Tyrangiel, J. “Radiohead Says: Pay What You Want.” *TIME Magazine* 1 October 2007.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

designers, retailers, lawyers, publishers, etc.). These connections supplied Radiohead with a wealth of opportunities that were pivotal in the long-term development of a global and devout fan-base. And these fans – as a social network with strong ties to Radiohead – ported easily over to the Internet. The group didn’t get where they are today solely on the merits of their music. As far as notions of independence from the music industry are concerned, Radiohead’s *In Rainbows* – though an exciting model at first glance – is likely an option that will only be workable for a select few. What Yorke should have been asking is not why *anyone* would need a label, but rather why [insert globally popular artist name here] would need one. For Radiohead such a self-contained, DIY distribution (and marketing) model may well be the ideal future. But would an equivalent distribution scheme have worked for post-punk musicians like The Desperate Bicycles? What about the Black Kids? In both cases the answer is probably no. Lesser-known artists trying to operate outside of the mainstream lack the luxury of having an already in-place, global social network of fans and business-related contacts that they can draw upon. Underscoring the point further was the eventual realization that Radiohead’s distribution and pricing model was not so innovative after all. More than two years prior to *In Rainbows*, Jane Siberry and her small-scale, web-based label, Sheeba Records, had instituted a similar “self-determined pricing” project, where “You decide what feels right to your gut.”<sup>190</sup> Radically, fans/customers could choose their own price (or even a “Pay Later” option), but not surprisingly – since very few people knew of Siberry’s endeavor – it was not read as a sign of the future of independent music.

So what exactly is the future?

In attempting to answer this question, or at least more critically speculate about it, it is worth returning to the broad inquiry posed at the very beginning of this project: Why do the social networks in and around spaces of music making matter? And more specifically, why are they significant with respect to independent artists and their practices as they navigate the music industry? Through detailed case studies of Rough Trade and MySpace this thesis has argued that the answer lies in the specific structural arrangements, as well as the technological, creative and connective affordances of available social networks. In unison

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<sup>190</sup> See: <http://www.janesiberry.com/> and <http://www.sheeba.ca/store/help.php#sdp>

these elements function to shape and, in the case of dominant discourses, normalize the practices and relational possibilities amongst network actors. Creative, expressive, and collaborative/connective avenues are opened up in certain directions, while being simultaneously constrained in others. MySpace takes Rough Trade's blurring of artist and worker, amateur and professional, producer and consumer, even further. Likewise, the demystification of the processes of music making - from production to distribution (even retail sale) – are carried to the extreme of near full artistic control and freedom. Everything, from start to finish, can hypothetically be micro-managed on a personal computer through MySpace. But the translation of strong internal ties and mutual collectivism between staff and artists at Rough Trade – a sense of shared community and music culture – remains less visibly clear in an online, decentralized, and open-to-anyone network like MySpace. And while collaborations might begin via MySpace, the processes of music making and the development of more meaningful relationships remain largely offline.

Meanings of independence are likewise negotiated within these social networks. An ongoing site of tension for independent artists lies in their desire be autonomous from the mainstream music industry on the one hand, and their aim to carve out niches, or even popular spaces in the music industry on the other. Different social networks allow independents to negotiate this site of tension in different ways. In moving from an early post-punk label like Rough Trade, to a contemporary online network like MySpace, this thesis has argued that these tensions are greatly lessened in the shift from largely industrial business practices to more post-industrial, user-generated modes in an increasingly networked culture. Understanding this more deeply leads not only to an awareness of how practitioners are discursively positioned by networks, but also a realization that the structures and affordances of networks can be leveraged and even reshaped to provide for new relational possibilities, and artistic positionalities. For those ascribing to an independent ethos – implicitly or explicitly – this latter point is both crucial and exciting, as it signals the potential for envisioning and actualizing alternative, sustainable modes of operating in today's music industry. The use of available social networks is exactly how practitioners have made, and continue to make long lasting connections with other artists and fans. These networks are nothing short of the lifeblood of independent music and identities.

Writing in 2005, David Kusek and Gerd Leonhard contend that once emerging networked music production and distribution technologies as well as channels are “more readily available to the artist and their managers, the greatest strengths of the ‘old-style’ record label will be in finance and marketing.” Surely we have arrived at that moment’s nascent instantiation. Just a few short years later one finds a music climate defined by a ubiquitous presence of online social networks (many geared largely towards music), Internet radio and podcasting, fan-generated MP3 blogs, and niche-oriented online music (maga)zines. Many of today’s independent musicians are taking full advantage of the free, open and easy-to-use affordances of platforms like MySpace, and networked culture more broadly, in order to further renegotiate and reshape power relations towards increased access and participation, artistic control and freedom, as well as new modes of community formation and collaboration. Without the ability to maintain dominance over discourses of production and distribution, labels will need to place increasing value in the contributions of artists, and it is in this context that it will be “easier for artists to leverage their creativity.”<sup>191</sup> But the “democratization” of the tools of production and distribution are only two of three forces that Chris Anderson, author of the *Long Tail*, cites as critical for driving today’s emerging niche economy, which is where the majority of independents fit in. What’s still needed is a way to connect supply with demand. Otherwise how will fans/consumers find and/or be driven to niche content? Anderson suggests wisdom-of-crowds, blog buzz, social tagging and folk-sonomies, online recommendations, and even word-of-mouth as obvious contemporary methods to get the job done, but where might record labels fit in?<sup>192</sup>

Contrary to sweeping “death knell” and “nail in the coffin” proclamations, record labels show no overall signs of disappearing anytime soon, at least not en masse. With no small degree of irony, Radiohead appeared privy to the reality of the situation, eventually using ATO Records, a subsidiary of RCA (owned by major label Sony BMG) to distribute CD and vinyl versions of *In Rainbows* beginning in January 2008. The oft-cited diminishing CD sales of the 21st century do not alone erase the powerful business networks and marketing capabilities of record labels. In fact many independent labels, such as Merge, Saddle Creek, and Matador have experienced unprecedented economic success a la album sales with artists

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<sup>191</sup> Kusek and Leonhard, 22.

<sup>192</sup> Anderson, C. *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*. New York: Hyperion, 2006, 53-56.



like The Arcade Fire, Bright Eyes, and Cat Power, respectively, all placing unexpectedly high on the Billboard Charts.<sup>193</sup> As e-commerce researchers Bockstedt et al. plainly state in their 2006 survey of artist-led online music distribution models, “Most artists simply do not have the resources to market themselves as effectively as a record label.”<sup>194</sup> And many independent labels have built up profound credibility, wherein the labels themselves maintain loyal (niche) followings. Fans come to know what to expect from particular labels like Drag City, Ghostly International, and Fat Possum; sometimes they expect the unexpected. Decades earlier Rough Trade had established itself as a bastion of independent music as well as new, diverse sounds. Credibility coupled with far-reaching business connections, means that independent labels still have a decisive role to play for many aspiring independent artists hoping to get their music out to a wider-audience. The connections and collaborative relationships made in working with a record label can up the ante for potential exposure by more readily directing fans towards new music. The Black Kids used MySpace and subsequent blog buzz to attract an initial following, and eventually coverage from more popular sources, including *Pitchfork*, *The New York Times*, and *NME*. Increased recognition led the band to sign a deal with the UK-based Almost Gold label for distribution outside of the US in order to branch out to new audiences. And they are actively seeking a US label as well. The increasingly popular Ingrid Michaelson, despite choosing to remain unsigned, has never denounced record labels altogether. Actually, she has made it clear that she would certainly consider working with a label, but only if it were a mutually beneficial relationship, one that respects her creativity and freedom as an artist.

In the context of today’s low-cost music production and distribution technologies, and available online social networks, artists like the Black Kids and Ingrid Michaelson certainly have not needed record labels to reach niche and popular audiences, respectively. Networks like MySpace, Last-FM, Facebook, Amie Street, and a long list of others, have provided unsigned artists with a range of sustainable alternatives. The mere existence of these many options is no insignificant matter. Recall Cabaret Voltaire frontman Steve Mallinder’s contention that no viable alternatives to independent record labels really existed for post-

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<sup>193</sup> The Arcade Fire’s 2007 *Neon Bible* charted at No. 2, Bright Eyes’ *Cassadaga* charted at No. 4, and Cat Power’s *The Greatest* charted at No. 34 on the Billboard Top 200, respectively.

<sup>194</sup> Bockstedt, J.C. et al. “The Move to Artist-Led On-Line Music Distribution.” *International Journal of Electronic Commerce* 10.3 (2006): 28.

punk practitioners during the late-1970s and 1980s. Certainly you could take the “one band, one label” approach of The Desperate Bicycles (Refill Records), but even they were aided in no small way by Rough Trade’s regional distribution network in getting their self-released singles out to would be fans. Rough Trade offered them and other DIY practitioners an important channel through which they could get their music to fans and other artists. Thirty years ago Geoff Travis consciously sought to rearrange the traditional power relations within a record label by positioning Rough Trade’s artists such that they were working with the label, not for it. Rough Trade’s equitable P&D contracts, and its collectivist-style internal decision-making, among both staff and artists, represented significant changes in how record labels operated. Fast-forwarding to contemporary online, networked culture one finds dramatically different sets of power relations, where a multiplicity of options means artists are positioned more so than ever before to be “working *with* the labels, not *for* the labels.”<sup>195</sup> Artists today can leverage the affordances of online social networks to not only position themselves within those networks, but also to force alterations in the structures and relational possibilities of more traditional social networks, like record labels. Here notions of independence and ideals tied to post-punk’s independent ethos can be pushed in new directions that positively favor musicians and fans, as well as engender more participatory spaces for making and sharing music.

As noted at many junctions throughout this thesis, the music industry of the 21st century is full of highly dynamic and contentious spaces that are undergoing subtle and sometimes profound transformations on an almost daily basis. It is therefore impossible to say *exactly* what the future of independent music will be. Ever the moderate and astute mind when it comes to contemplating trends in the music industry, David Byrne suggests that if anything, what *In Rainbows* really demonstrates is that “there is plenty of room for innovation in the music industry – this is just one of many new paths.”<sup>196</sup> The future will not entail a singular, one-size-fits-all model. And no prescriptive formulas for achieving viability or sustainability will be found. There will be many potential futures. For independent musicians specifically there are simply more options today than ever before, and there will certainly be more ahead. As discussed early on in this project, meanings of independence are ceaselessly evolving and

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<sup>195</sup> Kusek and Leonhard, 22-23. Original emphasis.

<sup>196</sup> Byrne, D. “David Byrne and Thom Yorke on the Real Value of Music.” *Wired* 18 December 2007.

never fully fixed. Meanings vary markedly from artist to artist, and network to network, as the binary setup between Rough Trade and MySpace has vividly illustrated. For some, independence will consciously be deployed as a (marketing) strategy aimed at mapping a particular discursive identity. For others it may be connotative of a commitment to alternative, oppositional, or even ethical ways of being in the world – an adherence to an ethos not for purposes of differentiation alone, but also to enact change and reshape dominant discourses. And like business models in a niche economy, meanings of independence will become ever more variegated moving forward.

Beyond these “many new paths” however, what also emerges out of this thesis is an understanding of how absolutely central the social element will be to any and all future directions in independent music. The creation and sharing of music, like so many other cultural practices of production, is inherently about a “do-it-together,” rather than “do-it-yourself” approach. Although independence from particular types of networks or institutions (e.g., major labels or MySpace) is certainly possible – now more than ever – independence from the social is not. In drawing upon the semi-historicized, comparative analysis of offline (Rough Trade) and online (MySpace) social networks developed herein, it seems reasonable to suggest that one future direction is likely to be a hybrid model, an intermingling and blending of these old and new social networks. As these spaces intersect with one another, old types of networks will inevitably undergo transformations, perhaps even renewal. What will happen as independent artists and labels work to integrate some of the affordances of popular online social networks like MySpace into their own internal operations? As they try to think forward, what might developers of new online social networks be able to learn from the strong internal communities that many independent labels like Rough Trade managed to foster?

Assessing a moment of profound change from within is always riddled with methodological difficulties. Social production practices, technologies, and platforms are currently undergoing constant transformations, thereby making many evaluations and predictions highly unstable. Through close readings of Rough Trade and MySpace as social networks it is evident that the creative and connective affordances of each network, as well as the sorts of discursive practices they allow for, are noticeably dissimilar in many ways, thereby

positioning practitioners differently. It's quite possible that ten years from now independent music making will only bear partial resemblance to contemporary practices. However, as I have argued in defining music as social, and demonstrating the significance of social networks in the cultural production of music, independent artists will continue to depend on cooperative networks and a sense of togetherness amongst artists as well as fans. The conceptual shift I have advocated for – a movement from a DIY to a “do-it-together” mentality – opens seemingly boundless entry points into future research on social networks active in spaces of music making. There are obvious opportunities to explore these social networks ethnographically, which will likely provide more nuanced socio-cultural readings of how artistic practices and identities are shaped and enabled by the networks they use. Given the scope and aims of my arguments, the temporal gap between offline networks like Rough Trade and online networks like MySpace was only marginally touched upon herein. That being said, the late-1980s through the turn of the century is assuredly an important transitional period for social networks in need of much investigation. Ultimately, practitioners – as well as researchers (academics and industry insiders), network designers, and entrepreneurs – must develop a deepening awareness of the structures and affordances of available social networks, particularly if they are interested in seeing processes of cultural production pushed toward even greater participation and equitability. The use of the word “potentials” in the title of this thesis is far from unintentional. Rich opportunities exist to foster music cultures defined by more varied discursive practices, and by extension greater sonic plenitude, but realization of such potentials necessitates awareness, action and most importantly cooperation, especially among independent artists.

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